FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS

FEI TIAN YE XIANG

Book 4

DINGHAI FUSHENG RECORDS

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XIANGYANG
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MAI CITY
SHANGYU
Yangtze River
JIANGNAN
北
西
東
南
The
DIVINE LAND

DINGHAI FUSHENG RECORDS

4

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Chapter 76

IT WAS EARLY SPRING. The road to Luoyang was covered in melting snow and ice, and a sudden return of the cold had made the open wilderness even more unbearable than Jiankang. Heading north at this time of year was far from ideal, but Sima Yao knew there was no time to waste.

Snowmelt was everywhere, and spring's damp chill slowed the progress of the Jin diplomatic envoys. The group had to stop frequently, and with several civil officials among them, Xiang Shu and the others couldn't simply abandon the envoys and push ahead as they might have outside the pass. And of course, one of those officials was Xie An—a man who couldn't carry anything heavier than a brush and whose only skill seemed to be drugging his enemies.

Why did *the* Grand Chancellor have to follow the exorcists to Luoyang?!

Xie An and a few other civil officials sat warming themselves around a roadside fire. Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun sat with them, but they were both silent, lost in thought. Feng Qianjun's expression was somber; with the deaths of Princess Qinghe and Gu Qing, the past two years had left an indelible mark on his life. Fate seemed determined to crush him, to strip away every last shred of hope he had.

"No matter how cold the Central Plains get, it can't compare to the cold beyond the Great Wall," Xie An observed. "To the Great Chanyu, this must be nothing."

Xiang Shu didn't bother to correct Xie An's term of address. "The winters in Chi Le Chuan aren't necessarily colder than those in the Central Plains," he replied evenly. "The Yin Mountains provide shelter, and there are more people, more cattle and sheep—not like the lands north of the Yangtze River."

The vast expanse between Luoyang and Jiankang stretched out as far as the eye could see. Often, they went thirty miles without spotting a single other soul, steeped all the while in a desolate chill.

In addition to Xie An, there was another high-ranking military figure among the Jin envoys: Huan Yi, nephew of Huan Xuan, the General of the Southern Expedition. Before Sima Yao's ascension, he had served as an Imperial Attendant. Huan Yi was a man of few words; as he sat silently across from Xiang Shu, the two of them were like statues.

Only Xie An, undeterred by rank or formality, made an effort to liven the atmosphere. "If you ever have the chance," he said to Huan Yi, "you should take a trip to the territories outside the pass."

Huan Yi's only response was a noncommittal grunt, so Xie An turned back to Xiang Shu. "Great Chanyu, are you confident that you'll be able to convince Murong Chong when you meet him?"

"No," Xiang Shu said bluntly. "Like of the rest of you, I'll act according to the situation."

The Jin envoy had actually made other preparations—or, more precisely, Xie An and Huan Yi were shouldering the most critical responsibility for the southern Han regime. The mission was complex. On the surface, their goal was to negotiate peace with Fu Jian, the ruler of the Great Qin, and thereby alleviate the impending crisis at Shouyang. Secretly, however, they hoped to reach a deal with Murong Chong and incite infighting between the Xianbei and Di peoples in the north. The secondary goal was to support the exorcists led by Chen Xing to eliminate Wang Ziye.

They had also brought Sima Wei along, locked away safely inside an iron carriage. Chen Xing couldn't explain precisely why he had made this decision; he just had the sense that Sima Wei might prove useful when they arrived in Luoyang. After all, Sima Wei was the only one who had seen the heart of Chiyou with his own eyes.

Xie An was roasting by the fire. "Where's Tianchi-xiaoshidi?" he asked, turning and looking into the distance. "I'll go take a look. You all keep talking, get to know each other better."

There was silence in his wake. Xiang Shu was in a bad mood, Feng Qianjun had lost his lover and had no desire to talk, and Huan Yi wanted nothing to do with the exorcists. They sat wordless as three logs of wood.

Chen Xing had found a mass grave north of a nameless village. The pit was filled with gnawed shards of bones, remnants of bodies devoured by wild animals. This was a site where the Jin and Qin armies had once clashed. The Xianbei had captured over a hundred villagers—men, women, and children—with the intention of burying them alive, but when the Jin army approached, the Xianbei had instead killed the villagers and thrown their bodies into the pit. By the time the Jin army reached the site, it was too late. The battle had been critical, and there was no time for the Jin to properly lay the innocent dead to rest; they had to move north, where they engaged in a protracted battle with the Xianbei.

The people of the nameless village had died without ever receiving the help they'd awaited. In their final moments, their hearts must have been filled with despair. Now, the pit was steeped in their resentment. Chen Xing and Xiao Shan stood at the edge of the pit, attempting to use that accumulated resentment along with the keen edge of the Sky-Rending Claws, which could cut through anything, to activate the Dinghai Pearl.

"Shall we try?" Chen Xing asked. He was deeply uncomfortable in the midst of such heavy resentment, but they had exhausted all their other options.

Xiao Shan bowed with his hands clasped in front of him and began to gather resentment from the pit. Chen Xing raised his right hand, the Heart Lamp glowing brightly in his palm, prepared to exorcise any resentment that might overwhelm Xiao Shan and lead him astray.

A bloodthirsty glint flashed in Xiao Shan's eyes, and he swung the Sky-Rending Claws, creating a deafening explosion. "Hah!"

Xie An, approaching them from behind, jumped in shock. "Be careful!" he shouted.

Two beams of light shot from the claws, converging on the Dinghai Pearl at the edge of the pit, but the Dinghai Pearl blocked them with a resounding clang. The beams set off a landslide in the mass grave, sending rocks tumbling down dangerously, but the Dinghai Pearl was unharmed.

Chen Xing had failed again.

Fifteen minutes later, the whole group sat around the fire, passing the dragon pearl between them.

“The Sky-Rending Claws were made from dragon talons,” Xiang Shu remarked. “And the Dinghai Pearl is a dragon pearl. You said so yourself.”

Chen Xing frowned. “That means we’ve hit a dead end. We finally got our hands on the Dinghai Pearl, but we have no way of breaking it.”

Huan Yi, who had a rough grasp of the situation, took the Dinghai Pearl and turned it over in his hands a few times before he passed it to Xie An. “Is this really supposed to contain all the world’s spiritual qi?” he asked. The pearl looked utterly unremarkable—dull and gray, nothing like a legendary treasure.

“It has to,” Xie An said. “We went through hell to find it.”

At last, Feng Qianjun spoke. “Do dragons have any natural enemies? Maybe you could try that angle.”

“Nope, none,” Chen Xing replied matter-of-factly.

Xiang Shu had been quiet until now, deep in thought. Suddenly, he said, “Is there another way?”

“What kind of way?” asked Chen Xing, but Xiang Shu seemed not to know the answer to that himself. He shook his head.

Xie An sat for a while longer, sipping his tea. “Let’s get moving,” he said finally. “If we keep a good pace, we might reach Shouyang before nightfall.”

The delegation set off again along the war-torn road. Before night had fully fallen, they reached the northeastern outskirts of Shouyang. Thick clouds shrouded the moon, plunging the surroundings into darkness, and the path ahead was rugged and difficult, winding through hills and uneven terrain. Even holding torches aloft to light their way, the group only narrowly avoided losing their bearings.

“Follow me,” Xiang Shu said at last. “I know of an abandoned village nearby.”

“How?” asked Chen Xing, surprised.

Xiang Shu didn’t answer. He led the group around a small hill, and sure enough, before long, they arrived at a desolate village. They were still within Jin territory, but Qin-controlled land was only a day’s journey north, and so the area had long been plagued by skirmishes between the two states. The northern inhabitants of Shouyang had fled long ago.

Under Xie An’s guidance, the group stopped to rest and eat. After dinner, Chen Xing wandered around searching for Xiang Shu but found no sign of him, so he returned to one of the dark, abandoned bedrooms and lay down.

“You got the wrong bed,” Feng Qianjun said from the other side of the bed.

“No, I didn’t,” Chen Xing replied cheerfully, settling in. “I’ll keep you company for a while.” He was fully clothed, and Feng Qianjun shifted further in to make space, letting out a quiet sigh.

There was no need for any more words. Chen Xing worried about Feng Qianjun struggling to come to terms with Gu Qing’s death, but Feng Qianjun knew that Chen Xing had been watching over him all along—it just wasn’t easy to speak about such things in front of others.

A soft glow bloomed in Chen Xing’s palm, which he laid gently over Feng Qianjun’s hand. “Feng-dage, are you all right?” he murmured.

Feng Qianjun remained silent for a long moment, then withdrew his hand. “Don’t use your mana,” he said in a low voice, “or Xiang-xiongdi will scold you again.”

“What are you thinking about? Gu Qing?”

Feng Qianjun shook his head. “Do you remember when we first met in Mai City and headed to Chang’an together?”

“Mm.” Chen Xing was momentarily lost in thought. More than two years had passed since then, but they’d been traveling along a war-torn route and looking for abandoned villages to rest in back then too, so this all felt vaguely familiar. Time passed so quickly.

“I started learning martial arts when I was eight,” Feng Qianjun went on. “I studied under Liu Jing-laoshi. Learning the sword to protect the

Sabers of Harmony and Life, to protect the Feng family, to protect…those I need to protect.”

Chen Xing thought for a moment. “Liu Jing?” He had never been well-versed in the names of martial artists from the Central Plains.

Feng Qianjun nodded. “A master of swordplay, though he’s since gone to Goguryeo. To be honest, I never had any remarkable natural talent. I studied for a full twenty years before I finally managed to complete my apprenticeship.”

Chen Xing couldn’t resist the urge to tease him. “Someone with such impressive skills is considered lacking in talent?”

Feng Qianjun gave him a helpless smile. “Yes, I have to admit, there’s a huge gap between me and Xiang-xiongdi. But it doesn’t matter… Two years ago, when I met you, I had just finished my training and was heading to Chang’an, full of ambition.”

“Xiang Shu’s martial abilities can’t be understood with common sense,” said Chen Xing. “There’s no one else in the world like him. The more I think about it, the more I believe that my Heart Lamp guided me to him for a reason.”

“Mm, you two are well-matched,” Feng Qianjun murmured. “I remember when we were heading to Chang’an together. We feared nothing. It was wonderful. Who would’ve thought that in the blink of an eye, all that would be gone? Everything happened so quickly, and now I have nothing. I thought that if I returned to Jiangnan, I could start fresh, but then even Qing-er was taken from me.”

Outside the abandoned house, the dark clouds gradually dispersed, revealing a clear night sky and a bright moon. Silver moonlight illuminated the world around them.

“Sometimes I can’t help but think about how wonderful it would be if the deceased could come back to life,” Chen Xing said. “Father, Mother, Shifu, the Akele king… Xiang Shu said that sometimes all he wishes for is that the banquet never ends. But it has ended, so what can we do?”

“That’s a dangerous thought, Little Tianchi. That might have been what led Wang Ziye to madness.”

Chen Xing sighed. While he was indifferent to his own life and impending death, sometimes he had to admit that he cared deeply about others. He was willing to give up his life—that much was inevitable—but in the end, all he wanted was for everyone else to live well and happily. He'd leave this world with regrets on his shoulders if other people couldn't escape the looming disaster.

It seemed he wasn't as indifferent to it all as he'd once thought.

"You were born under the star of Sui Xing, weren't you?" Feng Qianjun asked. "You're the only guiding light in this world, the hope that turns misfortune into blessing. I'm more and more convinced that there are a lot of things that only you can accomplish." Chen Xing opened his mouth to explain, but Feng Qianjun pressed on. "But I keep wondering if maybe I also have some kind of star of solitude in my fate. Maybe I'm destined to spend this life alone. Qinghe, Gu Qing, my brother… If not for me, they'd still be alive, wouldn't they?"

"How can you say that? Feng-dage, none of this is your fault!" Chen Xing sat up and looked at him. "I used to blame myself for the suffering of others too. But as Xiang Shu once told me, life and death are unavoidable. You have to understand, whether you were there or not—"

Feng Qianjun chuckled and gave Chen Xing's cheek a light pinch. Then he sighed. "I've been lying down for less than fifteen minutes, and you've already mentioned Xiang Shu four times. Go on, go look for him."

"I don't care where he is," Chen Xing muttered, about to lie back down, but Feng Qianjun gave him another push.

"I'm fine. I can handle this. Go on, before I end up getting my ass kicked again tomorrow because of you."

Chen Xing had no choice but to get up and leave the dilapidated house. He walked along a small river nearby, and found Xiang Shu standing by a waterfall on the hillside, washing something.

"It's the fifteenth day of the first month," Chen Xing said, looking up at the sky as he came up behind Xiang Shu. The clouds had dispersed, revealing a full moon as round as a jade plate that cast its bright light over everything around them. From the hillside, he could see the desolate

expanse north of the Yangtze River, where wisps of resentment had begun to rise from the ground and curl into the sky in dark tendrils. “The farther north we go, the denser the resentment becomes.”

“You see it too.” Xiang Shu turned his head slightly, looking down at the land below. “I thought I was the only one who could.”

“You and I are the only mortals who have mana. We’re the only ones who can perceive the changes in the hidden landscape.”

“Mortals, immortals,” Xiang Shu murmured. “The visible land, the hidden land.” With a sigh, he tucked the object he had been washing under the waterfall into his robe.

Chen Xing sat down beside him on a rock, watching the stream flow past. “What were you trying to say earlier today?”

“Nothing,” Xiang Shu said flatly.

“You must have a lot on your mind,” Chen Xing pressed.

“Even if I told you, you wouldn’t care.”

Chen Xing sighed helplessly. “How could I not care? If it has to do with the Dinghai Pearl, as long as you—”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“You know,” Chen Xing said, unable to help himself, “I remember a night when the moon was just like this.”

“Two years ago, on the fifteenth of the second month.” Xiang Shu gazed at the land below, lost in thought. “That was when we first met. You wanted me to be your protector, but I refused.”

“Why does it feel like we’ve known each other for more than just two years? After all this time, you’re still the same as before. You haven’t changed at all. In fact, sometimes you’re even worse than when we first met.”

“I’ve said many things more than once. You just didn’t understand—or rather, you pretended not to.”

Chen Xing blinked. He turned to look at Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu avoided his gaze. “What did I pretend not to understand?” he asked blankly.

“It’s nothing,” Xiang Shu muttered, as if to himself. “If I had known this was how you planned to fight Shi Hai, I never would have left Chi Le Chuan to chase you down south.”

“Then I would’ve just died sooner. Sima Wei would’ve taken me back, and by now, I’d be Chiyou’s vessel.”

“You have Sui Xing’s protection. Luck has always been on your side.”

Chen Xing scoffed. “You clearly don’t believe that.”

“I have another way to break the Dinghai Pearl,” Xiang Shu said abruptly.

Chen Xing was taken off guard. “What is it? I knew you had a plan!”

“Give it back to Wang Ziye. Let the resentment corrupt it.”

“You’re insane!” Chen Xing exclaimed. “We went through so much to get it—why on earth would we do that?”

“Wang Ziye wants to mold the Dinghai Pearl into Chiyou’s new vessel,” Xiang Shu explained. “He’s bound to refine it with resentment. When the final battle comes, we’ll channel the Heart Lamp into the Acala Blade. Then I can use all my strength combined with the Heart Lamp’s power to exorcise demons to deliver a shattering blow to the Dinghai Pearl.”

Chen Xing’s eyes grew wide. Xiang Shu had revealed an entirely new possibility. Zhuyin was a primordial dragon from the dawn of creation, and no artifact in the world could shatter the dragon pearl it had left behind. But if it was refined using resentment—if the Dinghai Pearl was transformed into a demonic artifact—then the Acala Blade, combined with the Heart Lamp at full power, could deliver a decisive strike. Maybe the Heart Lamp’s innate ability to counteract demons was the only way to destroy it.

Still… “This is too risky,” Chen Xing murmured. “Too reckless.”

Xiang Shu raised an eyebrow and made a gesture as if to say, *I knew you wouldn’t accept this plan.*

Chen Xing got up and started pacing. “But it’s completely feasible. Actually, I’ve been wondering all along—why is Wang Ziye so fixated on that ‘gate’ in the Longmen Mountains?”

“Mm.”

“Maybe that’s the altar where Zhang Liu and your mother tried to cast their spell to return to three thousand years ago.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m guessing Wang Ziye doesn’t actually know how to use the Dinghai Pearl, either. He hasn’t even had the chance to study it. This plan is insane, but it could work. If we return the Dinghai Pearl to him, he’ll need time to refine it with resentment, and he won’t be able to afford any distractions while he does it. That actually gives us more opportunities. The best moment would be the instant Chiyou begins transferring his soul into the Dinghai Pearl—”

“But for me to completely destroy the Dinghai Pearl with the Acala Blade,” Xiang Shu interrupted, “you’ll inevitably—”

“It doesn’t matter,” murmured Chen Xing. “I’ll burn the Heart Lamp to its very limit to support you.”

Xiang Shu turned to look at him. “When that moment comes…you might not survive.”

Chen Xing nodded. “Right.”

He understood what Xiang Shu meant, of course. After Wang Ziye refined the Dinghai Pearl with resentment, they would have to seize the right moment and merge Chen Xing’s soul completely with the Acala Blade to shatter the Dinghai Pearl. Before Chiyou could fully complete the soul transfer, Xiang Shu would destroy him and, simultaneously, the pearl. The destruction of the Dinghai Pearl would release all the spiritual qi contained within, allowing it to return to the world. After that, resentment would no longer be the world’s dominant force, and the vast influx of spiritual qi would purify the lingering resentment and usher the world into a new cycle.

“I can do it. But how do we make sure Wang Ziye doesn’t suspect our plan when we return the Dinghai Pearl to him?” Chen Xing frowned. “If we make even the slightest mistake, it’ll put his guard up—Xiang Shu?”

Xiang Shu had gotten up and walked away before Chen Xing could finish. Chen Xing stared blankly at Xiang Shu’s retreating figure and let out a quiet sigh.

Suddenly, he recalled what Xiang Shu had said before.

“What did I pretend not to understand?” Chen Xing muttered to himself.

Chapter 77

IN THE EARLY HOURS of the following morning, Xie An was doing some stretches by the creek when he noticed Xiang Shu coming out to wash his face.

“You didn’t sleep at all last night, did you?” Xie An asked. Xiang Shu didn’t respond. “Great Chanyu, how did you know there was a village here?”

“I’ve come here before.” Xiang Shu wrung his towel, squeezing out the bone-chilling water. After a moment’s pause, he added, “It’s just behind the mountain where I got captured by you Jin people and taken to the prison in Xiangyang.”

“I’m really very sorry about that,” Xie An said anxiously. “Do you recall the officer’s name? When we return, he will be severely punished.”

“They’re all dead. If Chen Xing hadn’t saved me back then, I would be too. I never expected to put my life on the line for you Han. I guess this is part of what they call the karmic cycle.”

Xie An smiled a little abashedly, but before he could find something to say to fill the silence, Xiang Shu went back into the house. Inside, Xiang Shu dropped the ice-cold towel on Chen Xing’s face and watched him sit bolt upright, flailing and shouting.

“Time to go,” Xiang Shu said.

On the first day of the second month in the seventh year of the Taiyuan era, the Great Jin’s diplomatic envoy group embarked on a grueling journey across mountains and rivers. This stretch of road shouldn’t have taken them more than half a month to traverse, but it was nearly twenty challenging days before they finally arrived in Luoyang.

If Chang’an could have been described as a great, tenacious tree that sprang from the desolate plains, then Luoyang was more like a vast stone tablet smeared with blood that held up the foundation of the world.

Luoyang's construction had been fully complete during the ancient Xia dynasty,[1] and the city's records in historical annals could be traced back almost 2,500 years. Shang, Zhou, Han, Wei, Jin—those five dynasties had all designated this place as their capital, and as the capital, it had been ravaged by the flames of war several times. What was burned was burned, but the fact remained that Luoyang had written the fate of the Divine Land. Mottled with important words scrawled in the blood of emperors and ordinary people alike, this tablet spoke of wild storms, of blood and tears, of the rise and fall of dynasties.

It didn't matter how many prosperous eras the human realm underwent; the remnants of those eras were eventually washed away by the wind and rain. Yet this stone tablet stood tall, always, in the center of the land, like another Mount Buzhou[2] bearing witness to countless wars and elegies.

Years back, Luoyang had been almost flattened by the Disaster of Yongjia sparked off by the Sima family. By the time the Murong clan took over governance of the city and established the Great Yan, the census found that not even eighty thousand households lived in the city, though it was the eastern capital and capable of supporting a million households. After that, the steel cavalry of the Di people, led by Wang Meng, had waged fierce battles against the Xianbei people. Thankfully, at the insistence of Chen Xing's elusive shixiong, whom he had met only a few times, the Di didn't massacre the entire city; they let the Hu and Han flee. It took nearly ten years of recovery, but Luoyang's numbers had swelled back to two hundred thousand households.

The residential estates, the city walls, and even the palace bore scars from fire. Ever since they'd become a part of Fu Jian's empire, the Murong family had been so poor that they had to borrow money from the Feng family to govern the state; they had no funds to repair the entire city. This was also why Feng Qianyi had struck an alliance with Princess Qinghe.

Chen Xing and the others entered Luoyang to find tens of thousands of dilapidated old estates, streets that crisscrossed each other, and houses scattered like pieces on a chessboard or stars in the sky, all surrounding the sprawling, chilly Ziwei Palace as if to protect it. The palace seemed to be

wrapped in a dense cloud of resentment, and under the light of the noonday spring sun, there came a bleak feeling of some immutable fate.

“At last, we’re here,” Xie An sighed.

This was the familiar city of which countless people in the south spoke, the capital of the founding emperor of the Great Jin dynasty. They were still at the city gates, but those Jin officials who had been born and raised in Jiangnan fell silent for a long time, overwhelmed to be personally setting foot in this ancient capital. Xie An’s eyes filled with tears as he led the envoys in bowing three times in the direction of Ziwei Palace.

A Qin official came to receive them, accompanied by the branch manager of the Xifeng Bank. A handwritten missive from the Jin emperor, Sima Yao, had recently been dispatched to Luoyang; when the missive arrived, a messenger driving a fast horse with a whip had swiftly relayed it to Chang’an, where it instantly became the subject of intense speculation within the Great Qin court. Fu Jian—the northern emperor—sat on his throne in Chang’an, so a group of diplomatic envoys would have been expected to head toward the pass to meet him. Instead, this group had gone to Luoyang, which was, at least in name, under Murong Chong’s control.

This was the first step in Xie An’s plan. Following a thorough discussion in the Jin court, they had decided to go to Luoyang to begin the peace talks. Their hope was to draw Fu Jian away from Chang’an, his home turf, and meet him in a third location that was the seat of neither the Jin’s nor the Qin’s power.

But in the end, Fu Jian had let Sima Yao’s missive go wholly unanswered.

“His Majesty has yet to decide whether a journey to Luoyang is in order,” said the Qin official, whose name was Helian Shuang. “You’ve all traveled so far to get here, so please…”

He glanced at Xiang Shu and Chen Xing and trailed off. Something about the two of them seemed familiar.

Xiang Shu, who had changed into the black uniform of a Han martial official, wore a silver mask that covered the left half of his face. His visible eyebrow had been trimmed, making him look even more heroic than before. There was no chance that Helian Shuang, who had been born into the

Xiongnu tribe, would connect this man to the former Great Chanyu of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant.

Helian Shuang's gaze moved to Chen Xing, who stood behind Xie An, having assumed the guise of a secretary. Chen Xing had combed his hair up and tucked it into a hat, and he had grown considerably since he first entered Chang'an as a youth of sixteen. Helian Shuang had only seen Chen Xing once, in a great hurry, when Xiang Shu first broke into the palace; there was no way he would recognize him at all.

"Shall we move to the officials' inn?" Helian Shuang asked in the Han language, his pronunciation very precise. He made an "after you" gesture.

"The inn is currently under the management of Xifeng," said the manager of Xifeng Bank's Luoyang branch, even more reverently than Helian Shuang. "Everyone, please come with me. What is this carriage?" He shot a curious look at the carriage in question, which had been covered with a metal outer shell.

Xie An smiled. "This is a gift from His Majesty to Heavenly Emperor Fu. When the Heavenly Emperor arrives, it will be opened."

Helian Shuang smiled back and didn't pry further. "Then please, everyone, make yourselves at home."

"No need, no need," Xie An said, trailing behind Helian Shuang as he led them on foot along Tongtuo Avenue. "Helian-daren, there is no need to worry about us. It's rare we have the opportunity to return to our homeland in the north, and we were hoping to see the sights of Luoyang." For the purposes of the mission, Xie An had assumed the name Xie Wei. Few in the north had ever seen his face, however, so he had no need to disguise it with makeup or a mask.

"Xie-daren, you must be joking," said Helian Shuang. "Luoyang today is the territory of my Great Qin's emperor."

"Ah, I misspoke, I misspoke," Xie An said hurriedly, smiling again.

"I must say, if any of you are interested in immigrating to my Great Qin, I recommend it. His Majesty the Heavenly King holds scholars in the highest esteem."

This again? Chen Xing thought. As they walked down Tongtuo Avenue, he noticed gold changing hands all up and down the road, ushering in an endless stream of businessmen and merchants much like those in Chang'an. All in all, though, there was something lacking—it didn't have the buzz of a proper city. Many of the merchants in Luoyang only served Xianbei aristocrats and, through them, the influential families of the Five Hu. Ordinary citizens couldn't afford to shop here.

Helian Shuang brought the dozen or so members of the diplomatic envoy group to Luoyang's Songbai Residence. "Everyone, you can rest here. Tonight, Prefect Murong will host a banquet to welcome you all. Carriages will come to pick you up later this evening."

They were all weary from the long journey, so they went to rest. They changed into bathrobes, and as they went to bathe, Feng Qianjun said, "I don't want to see Murong Chong, and if I go to the banquet, things could get even more complicated. If any local officials were to recognize me…"

"Here, listen to my plan!" said Xie An. He had no martial skills to speak of, but he did still sometimes have good insights. "Qianjun, you should scout around the city after night falls. It'd be best if you could bypass the city scouts and figure out a way to inform Murong Chong that we'd like to invite him to a private meeting after this evening's banquet."

Chen Xing watched Feng Qianjun carefully. Feng Qianjun's emotions had been rather unstable recently, and Chen Xing worried that he might say or do something to make people suspicious. He was even more worried that Xiao Shan might say something that he shouldn't during the banquet.

As it turned out, though, Xie An had already thought of that. "And you, Xiongnu Prince Xiao Shan, I'll have to trouble you to accompany Feng Qianjun tonight."

Thank heaven and earth, that's a brilliant idea, Chen Xing thought. This would neatly sidestep the risk of Xiao Shan causing problems during the banquet. They had just arrived in Luoyang and were wholly ignorant of the situation there, and Feng Qianjun would need to get in contact with the assassins the Feng family had hired in the area. With Xiao Shan around, that job would be at least a little safer.

“Okay,” Xiao Shan said immediately. “I’m going.”

Chen Xing grabbed him before he could go anywhere. “Even if you aren’t going to the banquet, you still have to bathe!” He dragged Xiao Shan back, tossed him into the bathing pool, and gave him a good scrub before he let him leave.

Feng Qianjun also left after a simple bath, leaving Chen Xing and Xiang Shu soaking in the water. They stared silently at each other, each lost in their own thoughts.

Since their conversation in the dilapidated village, Xiang Shu spoke even less than he had before. He seemed to retreat further into silence with each passing day. Chen Xing had, on several occasions, tried to find him to clear things up, but Xiang Shu always merely nodded as if he wasn’t interested in speaking. Once in a while on the road, however, when Chen Xing glanced back to see where Xiang Shu was, he found Xiang Shu watching him. Each time it happened, Xiang Shu noticed Chen Xing’s gaze and spurred his horse forward to the very front of the group, apparently unwilling to share his thoughts with Chen Xing.

“Do you think Murong Chong will recognize us?” Chen Xing asked.

“He’s not a fool,” Xiang Shu said. “Even after all this time, you still think all Hu people are idiots?”

“Can’t you be a little nicer to me? Do you always have to be so mean?” Practically everyone else on the journey with them had noticed that Xiang Shu had some kind of unresolved issue with Chen Xing. Feng Qianjun had taken Xiao Shan away with him, and Xie An, Huan Yi, and the others had deliberately held off on coming into the bathing pool, all so that Xiang Shu and Chen Xing could have space to hash things out privately.

Xiang Shu didn’t respond. He sat on the side of the pool with his legs crossed and lifted his head to look up into the thick cloud of steam that shrouded the ceiling. Chen Xing watched him through the steam, thinking that he looked even better without clothes on than with them.

He gave up any intent of arguing with Xiang Shu and mustered up a smile. “I’ve thought through what I said that day, every facet of it. I’ve decided to take your suggestion.”

“Mm,” Xiang Shu replied mildly. “My suggestion to seek death.”

“It’s worth it. But Xiang Shu…I have something I’d like to tell you,” Chen Xing said. Xiang Shu’s brow furrowed, and he shot a glance at Chen Xing. “My luck has always been good, so maybe, in the end, my death won’t be set in stone. Right? Then again, maybe I *will* lose my life in the final battle…so shouldn’t you be a little nicer to me?”

Xiang Shu was speechless.

“Or think about this: If, when it’s all over, I’m not around anymore, and you think back to our time together and you remember we were always arguing, wouldn’t that make you a little sad?”

Xiang Shu sucked in a deep breath. There was a long-suppressed fury lodged in his chest with no release valve.

Chen Xing naively pressed on. “Either way, I’ll be gone by then, so I won’t know anything; if anyone felt guilty, it would be you. Of course, if you’re fine with it, just pretend I never said a word.”

“How are you always so calm when you speak about your own death?”

Chen Xing smiled. “It’s like my shifu once said: Which of all the living beings on this earth doesn’t die? And as long as you’re living, you have to live well. It’s best to focus on the present.” That familiar sadness returned to Xiang Shu’s gaze, but Chen Xing carried on speaking to himself. “Besides, there’s always a chance. No one will know the final result until we get there, right? And even more than my death, I’m worried about how we’re going to deliver the Dinghai Pearl into Wang Ziye’s hands…”

“I’ll help you,” Xiang Shu said suddenly. Chen Xing gave him a questioning look. “Turn around.”

He’d noticed that Chen Xing was having a great deal of difficulty reaching behind to wash his own shoulders. Chen Xing turned so that he was facing away from Xiang Shu, and Xiang Shu lifted the cloth to help Chen Xing wash his shoulders and back. Chen Xing understood then that Xiang Shu had started to accept the situation.

That was for the best. They didn’t have much time left, so they needed to cherish the present.

“Xiang Shu,” he said softly, “are you…”

Xiang Shu’s movements halted for a moment, but Chen Xing found he didn’t want to finish his sentence. What was there to say? In the past few days, he’d had an increasing sense that Xiang Shu cared about him. Where had that feeling come from? Was it the way Xiang Shu watched him? Or, thinking back, was it that night when he said, *You just didn’t understand—or rather, you pretended not to*?

“Am I what?” Xiang Shu asked, his voice suddenly a little unsteady.

Chen Xing’s heart began to beat violently. He knew when things had changed: Xiang Shu had treated him differently since one month ago, when Chen Xing fell into a coma during the sacrificial rites. They both had so much to say to each other, but they always stopped short of saying it. Something always held them back.

At first, Chen Xing had been reliant on Xiang Shu. He’d believed that Xiang Shu could accomplish any task in this world, no matter how difficult. But gradually he’d discovered that Xiang Shu didn’t really follow his instructions; Chen Xing often couldn’t force Xiang Shu to listen, and he often had no choice but to let Xiang Shu act as he saw fit. They were probably the least cooperative pair in the Exorcism Department’s history. Sometimes, Chen Xing even doubted whether they’d manage to follow through on this ill-conceived, profoundly flawed plan.

When he thought of confronting Xiang Shu, he wanted to push him and kick him and beat him up, then shout and holler and let out all of his gloomy frustration. *Why can’t you listen to me?* But when he saw Xiang Shu in person, when he was actually looking at him, that pent-up anger wouldn’t come out. The best he could do was snap at him occasionally.

Were Chen Xing’s fate not foreordained, perhaps their interactions would have been different. Sometimes, Chen Xing couldn’t stop himself from picturing a world where mana was abundant and flourishing. In that world, he’d follow Xiang Shu around everywhere. He’d mess with him sometimes just to see what he looked like when he was irritated. Then he’d apologize and see his helpless expression.

But that wasn’t the world they lived in.

“Nothing,” Chen Xing replied finally. It was best for both of them to maintain the status quo.

One of Xiang Shu’s hands covered the nape of Chen Xing’s neck. With the other, he wiped Chen Xing’s shoulders with a cloth. “Remember that you promised me something,” he said suddenly.

“I know you won’t ask me to do something beyond my capability,” Chen Xing said. He heard Xiang Shu suck in a deep breath behind him, as if he wanted to say something but was once again resisting it.

“You think that I want you to do something beyond your capability?” Xiang Shu asked mildly.

Chen Xing began to smile, but before he could respond, he heard Xie An’s voice calling from outside. “Um… Are you both done with your business? We’re close to the time that Murong Chong chose… Uh, not that it’s okay to disturb you, but…”

“Right away!” Chen Xing called back, abruptly realizing how long they had spent bathing. The diplomatic envoys were still waiting outside for their turn in the bathing pool. He and Xiang Shu got up and got dressed.

By the time Xie An and the rest had finished their hurried bath, the carriage procession that Murong Chong had sent was waiting for them at the front door. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu changed into slightly more formal clothing. Xiang Shu put on the silver mask, but it did nothing to hide his tall, attractive figure. It could even be said that the more he tried to hide, the more the truth was exposed.

“He’s going to recognize us,” Chen Xing said, “so is the mask—”

“The mask is there to tell him not to expose our identities,” Xiang Shu replied evenly. “It’s not to hide my identity from him. How dumb are you?”

Chen Xing spluttered at this, but he realized then that if Xiang Shu was mocking him again, that meant Xiang Shu was no longer angry. He smiled and helped Xiang Shu straighten his collar. “All right, all right, I was never smart to begin with. Let’s go.”

They got into the same carriage. Xiang Shu's long limbs made the space a little cramped, and Chen Xing had nowhere to put his hand but on Xiang Shu's thigh. Thinking of what they had just said to one another in the bathing pool made him think about how he felt about Xiang Shu, and all of a sudden he couldn't focus on anything else. If Xiang Shu really did have intentions toward him, then in these last days of his life…

Chen Xing couldn't resist turning his head to look at Xiang Shu. *What if my hunch is correct? Is Xiang Shu interested in me too?* For a long time now, he had always refused to see it, or perhaps it was that he didn't want to think in that direction—until Xiang Shu had said that sentence. If he scooted over and kissed Xiang Shu on the lips right now, what would happen?

He gazed at Xiang Shu's masked face and felt his own cheeks suddenly grow hot.

"What are you looking at?" Xiang Shu asked disinterestedly.

Chen Xing shook his head and turned his head away. After a moment, Xiang Shu raised his arm and placed it around Chen Xing's shoulders.

"You must surrender your swords before you enter the palace," a palace attendant announced.

The party was stopped in front of the entrance to the palace, but Xiang Shu refused to hand over the Acala Blade. "Go back and tell your Prefect Murong that if he wants me to surrender my sword, I'll leave."

The attendant opened his mouth to reproach Xiang Shu, but when he got a proper look at Xiang Shu's imposing bearing, he snapped his mouth shut. Xie An, courteous and affable, smiled and patted the attendant's shoulder. "Why don't you go ahead and report this to the prefect?"

Not long thereafter, someone returned with a message: The palace attendants were to let the warrior accompanying the party keep his sword. This applied only to Xiang Shu. With that settled, the party finally entered the palace, where they were led into Mingtang Hall. In the hall's side chamber, Murong Chong had laid out a banquet. Everyone took their seats according to the proper order, with Xie An at the head, Chen Xing behind him, and Xiang Shu seated diagonally behind Chen Xing.

“Murong-daren has arrived!”

Everyone sat up and adjusted their lapels as Murong Chong entered the hall wearing a black cultivator’s robe. Before he arrived, everyone had been gossiping about the most handsome man of the north; he was just as famous as Xie An’s grandson, Xie Hun. It was said that Murong Chong’s appearance was comparable to that of Pan An or Wei Jie,[3] but when they laid eyes on him, the group of scholars thought, *Eh, he’s all right, but nothing to write home about.* He was about as good-looking as Xiang Shu, or perhaps slightly better.

Still, a second later, they all nodded and agreed that their expectations had been too high. They didn’t feel like they had seen a god come to the mortal realm, but Murong Chong’s title of “world’s most beautiful man” was well-deserved. Few of the people they had ever met could have compared to him.

“Everyone has traveled a long way to come here,” Murong Chong began, sounding a bit absent-minded. Then he noticed Chen Xing sitting among the envoys with Xiang Shu behind him, and he paused.

Xiang Shu was silent, acting wholly unconcerned. The entire hall waited for Murong Chong to finish what he was saying. Murong Chong’s phoenix brows rose, and his thin lips twitched slightly. The pause stretched out further.

Finally, he completed his thought. “It must have been an arduous journey.”

Xie An and the others demurred, but they were all staring at Murong Chong too. Murong Chong stood there for a long while, evidently mulling over something, before he walked over to the main seat and sat down in a cross-legged martial position. He rapped his knuckle against the table to summon an attendant and issued a few commands in a low voice. The attendant turned and left.

“Prefect-daren isn’t commanding his axe-wielders to go hide for an ambush, is he?” Chen Xing joked.

Everyone chuckled. Murong Chong froze, just for a moment. “No,” he said, “I would never attempt to show off my meager skills to an expert.”

Several officials from Luoyang were in attendance, seated below the main seat with Helian Shuang at their head. Looking at them, Xie An understood immediately that Fu Jian had sent Helian Shuang to keep an eye on Murong Chong.

“The prefect’s name is known far and wide,” Xie An said. “Indeed, his reputation is well-deserved, and it’s a reputation my country’s emperor has long been aware of.”

Chen Xing took a measured look at Murong Chong. He had definitely already recognized Chen Xing and Xiang Shu. Things were different now than when Princess Qinghe had lost her life, though. It seemed Xiang Shu’s understanding of Murong Chong was accurate: He wasn’t looking for revenge, at least not right now.

“My fame has always been a burden to me,” Murong Chong said in a cool tone. “Sometimes notoriety isn’t a good thing.”

Chen Xing had been thinking about the impression he got from Murong Chong from the moment Murong Chong entered the room. Now, he finally landed on the right word to describe him: chilly. Murong Chong and Xiang Shu were both handsome men who could be cold and distant, but Xiang Shu had the emotions of a mortal and even, on occasion, displayed a hint of warmth. Murong Chong, on the other hand, was chilly through and through. He had the air of someone who was detached from the world altogether. Perhaps his sister’s passing had left him with no other connections, nothing left in the world that could move his heart.

To Xie An, the banquet posed a challenge. They needed to get on the Murong family’s good side, but attempts to ingratiate themselves could easily go awry given the Murong family’s bitterness about the fall of the Great Yan. Complimenting Murong Chong’s youthful good looks was a bad idea, as it would remind people of Murong Chong’s relationship with Fu Jian. Xie An had to be careful not to press on that sore spot.

He thought over his options. “Luoyang still has many things to repair,” he said at last, “but the citizens have already settled in. Prefect, your care toward your citizens is evident.”

“I can hardly take credit for that,” Murong Chong said, still in that absent tone. He shot a look in Xiang Shu’s direction. “It was Helian-daren

and the various officials' hard work. Their actions merely reflect well on me."

With that, the conversation died again. Murong Chong didn't seem interested in making small talk, nor in trying to get on these Han people's good sides. After another moment's contemplation, Xie An decided to cut straight to the heart of the matter. "What was His Majesty's decision?"

"I don't know," Murong Chong said in a voice both cold and steady. "I sent someone to deliver the letter to him. Perhaps he'll come… Oh, you're here. How's your illness?"

A silhouette had appeared outside Mingtang Hall's side door. The group from the Great Jin startled, thinking at first that it was Fu Jian, but then they saw that it was a slim young man in his twenties. Most of them were confused, but Chen Xing recognized the newcomer at once and almost shouted aloud.

Tuoba Yan!

Despite the exceedingly thick clothes he wore, it was evident that Tuoba Yan was even thinner than he had been when Chen Xing met him briefly back in Chi Le Chuan. His once-handsome face was drawn and weary, so pale it bordered on gray, like a carefully crafted brass vessel that had been left to gather dust. A spot of dark qi in the center of his brow flickered in and out of existence. Yet the moment he lay eyes on Chen Xing, his long-lost smile returned to his face.

"You've all come," Tuoba Yan said, smiling and taking a seat. His eyes were as bright as Chen Xing remembered them, and he looked only at Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu's silence became frosty.

"You…" Chen Xing's shock was almost insurmountable. There was nothing shocking about seeing Tuoba Yan in Luoyang—in fact, it was a pleasant surprise—but seeing him so ill washed away any joy Chen Xing might have felt at reuniting with an old friend. Chen Xing wanted to ask him what was wrong, but Xiang Shu remained a step ahead; he poked Chen Xing gently in the shoulder, a reminder to maintain their cover.

Helian Shuang was already giving Chen Xing and Tuoba Yan a suspicious look, and the other Hu officials were staring at Chen Xing. He

shut his mouth.

Tuoba Yan managed to hold onto a faint smile. “I fell ill recently, so I’ve come to Luoyang to recuperate. The prefect told me that some Han people had arrived, and I wanted to come and ask after a xiaoxiongdi of mine. His name is Chen Xing. I heard that he went to Jiankang, but I don’t know how he’s doing now.”

“He’s doing well,” Xiang Shu said.

Tuoba Yan smiled. “Good. Now I needn’t worry.”

“Something to eat?” Murong Chong asked him.

Out of nowhere, Tuoba Yan picked up Murong Chong’s wine cup and held it up to the gathered people. “A salute to you all.”

Murong Chong frowned. “You can’t drink wine.”

But it was too late; Tuoba Yan had already drunk it. He set the cup back down and nodded. “Please excuse me; I’ll be taking my leave.”

Chapter 78

A HUNDRED DIFFERENT EMOTIONS swirled in Chen Xing's heart. Everyone raised their cups and drank.

"Allow me to also salute you all with a toast," Xiang Shu said when he'd finished his cup.

Everyone blinked in surprise, but Murong Chong drank, and everyone followed suit. Finally, Murong Chong said, "I'll toast everyone once more. After that, feel free to go about your business."

Murong Chong drank the last cup, but his mind was clearly not on the banquet. He got up, made his farewells, and left, presumably to go find Tuoba Yan. The Jin diplomatic envoys stayed behind to eat some food and exchange formalities with Helian Shuang and the Qin officials, so Xie An was forced to stay put and wait it out. Xie An kept shooting meaningful glances at Xiang Shu the entire time they were there, trying to tell him to go figure out how to privately contact Murong Chong, but Xiang Shu pretended not to notice.

When nine o'clock came, Helian Shuang had some servants escort them back to the inn.

"What's wrong with Tuoba Yan? Is he really that ill?" Chen Xing wondered aloud. Xiang Shu, who was sitting cross-legged on the bed with one foot propped up on the table, did not respond. "And I wonder what Feng-dage's found. Why haven't he and Xiao Shan come back yet?"

Xie An came to find the two of them, having stopped to tidy up a bit after he returned to the Songbai Residence. "That young man we saw today who was weakened by illness, what's his story?"

Chen Xing told him about how they'd met Tuoba Yan.

"That's good to hear," Xie An mused. "Maybe we can seek assistance from him."

“Mhm,” Xiang Shu agreed mildly. “He pursued Chen Xing across thousands of miles, from Chang’an all the way to Chi Le Chuan.”

“You—! Xiang Shu, are you trying to pick a fight?” Chen Xing protested.

They were interrupted by a series of three knocks from the floor-to-ceiling window at the back of the room. Xiang Shu picked up a weiqi stone and flicked it at the window to open it, and Feng Qianjun climbed in.

“We’ve made contact with Murong Chong,” Feng Qianjun announced. “We’ll take the secret passageway there. He has something to discuss with you.”

“We’re not going,” Xiang Shu said. “Shut the window behind you.”

“We’re going!” Xie An and Chen Xing said at the same time. “It was so hard to get this opportunity!” added Chen Xing. “How can we not go?!”

“I’ll go change into my night outfit right away,” Xie An said. “Just give me a moment.”

“If you want to go, then go by yourself,” said Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing rounded on him. “What exactly do you have against Tuoba Yan?”

“I don’t have anything against him. Murong Chong isn’t here; is he saying he wants me to go see him? Does he think he’s the boss now? Who does he think I am? A guard dog that comes whenever he calls?”

“Hey!” Feng Qianjun cut in. “Can you guys save the pissing contest for later? My subordinate is waiting.”

“How much do you pay him every month?” Xiang Shu asked. “I’ll pay him double to wait.”

Chen Xing sighed.

“All right, all right,” said Feng Qianjun. “He’ll be happy to wait. I’ll let you guys talk.”

“If you don’t go now, then when Xie-shixiong comes back in his night outfit you’ll have to carry him over the rooftops,” Chen Xing pointed out. “Are you sure you want to do that? I bet that even if you spend all this

time arguing, you'll end up having to come anyway. But fine, if you aren't coming, then I'll go on my own."

"I'm here," Xie An announced. He was clad in a pitch-black outfit, smiling and hiding in the shadows. "See? This night outfit is pretty good, isn't it?"

Feng Qianjun threw his hands up. "Xie-daren, do you think simply changing outfits means you've become an assassin?"

Xiang Shu stayed exactly where he was. Chen Xing ignored him, straightened his own clothes, and stepped outside. A moment later, Xiang Shu strapped his heavy sword to his back and followed him out, looking deeply annoyed.

Chen Xing didn't understand what Xiang Shu was being so obstinate about. He knew Xiang Shu wanted to talk to Murong Chong; that afternoon, before they arrived, they'd explicitly agreed that they would find a chance to go speak to Murong Chong in private. The afternoon agreement had apparently gone out the window when evening came and Xiang Shu saw Tuoba Yan. Something about Tuoba Yan had pissed him off.

Was he jealous? Chen Xing stilled, thinking back through their previous interactions. Xiang Shu really might have been jealous of Tuoba Yan.

"Hey, Protector," Chen Xing said tentatively. Xiang Shu gave him a sideways glance, frowning. Chen Xing had never put it together before, but now so many of Xiang Shu's actions made so much more sense. He *was* jealous of Tuoba Yan! "You…don't like Tuoba Yan because…"

He was probing, but Feng Qianjun filled in the blank. "Because he's jealous of him, obviously."

Xiang Shu's hand shot out so suddenly it made Chen Xing shout, grabbing Feng Qianjun's collar and dragging him over. Feng Qianjun was about as tall as Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu's lightning-fast movements left him no means of retaliation.

"Um," Xie An said. "Protector, for my sake—no, for His Majesty's sake—we're in the middle of carrying out official business. Why don't you let him go for now? You two can settle your grudges when you return."

Xiang Shu released Feng Qianjun. An intensely awkward silence settled over all four of them.

Chen Xing wanted to say something to smooth things over, but he knew that trying to cover this up would only make things worse, so he kept his mouth shut. Thankfully, a savior appeared in the form of a black-clad assassin standing in front of the waterway outside the palace. The assassin whistled at them and turned to lead them through the secret passageway into the royal palace.

The Feng family had once had many retainers, but they'd scattered to the winds after Fu Jian had destroyed the Feng family home in Chang'an. Those who'd moved to Luoyang, though, had managed to maintain contact with the Murong family, and now that Feng Qianjun was back in Luoyang, all it took for him to get in contact with Murong Chong was to activate his family's old network again. It wasn't long at all before Murong Chong invited Xiang Shu and Chen Xing back to the palace after the evening's banquet.

One out-of-the-way hall deep in the palace was still lit despite the late hour. Xiao Shan was inside, eating the dinner that Murong Chong had provided. Tuoba Yan sat off to one side, soaking up the warmth of the fire and occasionally murmuring to Xiao Shan. Murong Chong stood waiting for them outside the doors to the hall. When he saw Xiang Shu, his untouchable, otherworldly expression shifted minutely.

"A man who wants revenge is inviting his enemy to his doorstep?" Xiang Shu asked darkly. "Who do you think you are?"

Murong Chong sucked in a deep breath. "All of our previous debts and grudges shall henceforth be erased with a single stroke of the pen."

"All right, then I'll be leaving."

"Great Chanyu, let me say my part!" Murong Chong quickly stepped forward. "Stop!"

"He's so handsome, can't we hear him out?" Chen Xing asked.

Murong Chong blinked. Xiang Shu slapped a hand against his own face.

“Tianchi?” said Tuoba Yan. “Long time no see.”

Chen Xing looked at Tuoba Yan, then back at Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu gave up and followed him into the hall. Murong Chong didn’t have any bodyguards in there with him. Feng Qianjun came in last and closed the door behind him.

Murong Chong took another deep breath. “I’ve figured out what caused Jiejie’s death.” He turned to look at Xiang Shu. “You found out about Wang Ziye’s true motives a long time ago. Why didn’t you say anything then?”

“If I had, would any of you have believed me?” Xiang Shu asked. “The Murong clan’s judgment has been blinded by long-standing family feuds and lust for revenge over the fall of the Yan state. I reminded her of that several times, in fact.”

“But when it all happened, you could have saved her!”

“If I hadn’t killed her, Chen Xing would have died.”

Murong Chong became agitated again. “So you gave up my sister’s life, all for the sake of a Han!”

“You want revenge?!” Xiang Shu demanded. “I’m happy to duel you right now!”

Silence. Xie An sat down to one side and, seeing that Xiao Shan was eating some pastries, picked one up for himself. “Whatever bad blood there is between you two, it’s best that you let it go for now,” he said. “Strange… Why do I feel like I’ve been saying that all throughout this journey?”

Murong Chong let out a long sigh and sat down on the chair. After a few seconds of silence, Xiang Shu shot a glance at Tuoba Yan.

Chen Xing took the opportunity to ask Tuoba Yan the question that had been on his mind since he saw Tuoba Yan at the banquet. “What happened to you?”

Tuoba Yan shook his head. Murong Chong spoke up to explain for him. “He was wounded, and the wound still hasn’t scabbed over. Wang Ziye was giving him medicine so that he wouldn’t turn into a drought fiend, but now that I’ve killed Wang Ziye, no one else has been able to make this

medicine. That's why I brought him to Luoyang, far away from the troubles of Chang'an."

"Let me see? Where's the wound?" Chen Xing asked.

"It's not a big deal," said Tuoba Yan. "I've actually felt a lot better since I stopped taking that medicine."

Xie An looked at Murong Chong. "Prefect Murong, though we have been far away in Jiankang, we know some things about the situation you're facing—"

Xiang Shu, who'd just been standing there, suddenly interrupted him. "Xiao Shan, what were you all discussing before I arrived?"

Xiao Shan tilted his head questioningly, and Xie An let out a polite cough at the interruption.

"Nothing much," Tuoba Yan said. "I was just asking where you guys have been. It's been a year since I last had any news of Tianchi."

"What business is he of yours?" Xiang Shu asked menacingly.

"Xiang Shu!" Chen Xing snapped.

Everyone fell silent again. Xie An floundered. "Um… If any of you have any bad blood, then you should… Oh, whatever, you all know what I'm trying to say. Why am I always so long-winded? When people get old, they become verbose. Forgive me."

Murong Chong returned to his explanation. "Fu Jian has taken away my military command, and he believed what my sister told him, so he's keeping some hundreds of thousands of living dead at the foot of the Longmen Mountains. You should go back and tell your king to run for his life."

"Is your sister still truly alive?" Feng Qianjun asked, frowning.

"I don't know if you'd truly consider her dead or alive, but she's become a monster."

"Thankfully Wang Ziye is dead," Tuoba Yan put in.

"If Wang Ziye really died, then what was the monster that we met in Jiangnan?" asked Xiang Shu.

A fearful little shiver shook through Murong Chong. “He didn’t die…?”

It had been a month since the chaos at the sacrificial rites in Jiangnan. News of those events should have reached all corners of the world by now. If Murong Chong hadn’t heard about it, he must have been under house arrest in the palace, cut off from news of the outside world.

In contrast to Murong Chong, though, Tuoba Yan was pretty calm. He turned to Murong Chong and asked, “What should we do now?”

Wordlessly, Chen Xing called up the Heart Lamp and pressed its light against Tuoba Yan’s forehead.

Tuoba Yan had been pressing down on his forearm to prevent Chen Xing from seeing his wound, but his efforts became futile when Chen Xing flooded his meridians with the Heart Lamp’s power. He was racked with excruciating pain. Chen Xing compared his condition to Che Luofeng’s in the moments before he died; Tuoba Yan’s symptoms were similar to those of a person who was on the verge of turning into a drought fiend. That confirmed it: Wang Ziye had given Tuoba Yan the Demon God’s Blood. It was strange, however, that Tuoba Yan had not yet transformed. The blood’s effects on him had been delayed for a year or longer, perhaps because it had been mixed with other medicines.

Tuoba Yan gritted his teeth bitterly against the pain, sweat beading on his brow, as the Heart Lamp worked to counteract the Demon God’s Blood in his meridians.

When Murong Chong saw Chen Xing using the Heart Lamp, he knew that he had found the right people. “How is he?” he asked.

“You *will* get better,” Chen Xing promised Tuoba Yan.

Tuoba Yan was breathing heavily, his eyes screwed shut. When the Heart Lamp’s light dissipated, he slumped over, unconscious. Chen Xing laid him down flat on the floor before revealing the truth of the matter to the others.

“His life force is battling against the Demon God’s Blood,” Chen Xing explained. “Thankfully, he didn’t ingest a large quantity of the blood, so he may yet survive this. Make sure that he’s allowed to rest in peace and

quiet in the coming days. I don’t actually know if he’ll make it through, so be sure to prepare for the worst.”

Murong Chong took this news in stride. “Living can be its own form of suffering,” he said. Nearly all of the people he had cared for—his father and mother, his sister, his cousins, his relatives—had died, succumbing to the adversity of this harsh world. Some had died at the hands of the Qin, others at the hands of the Han. “Death can be an escape. He asked me to bring him to Luoyang so that, if the day came when he couldn’t control it anymore and turned into a drought fiend, I would be there to kill him. He didn’t want to be under Fu Jian’s control.”

“You’re right,” said Xiang Shu, walking over to a chair and sitting down. It was rare that he had the chance to see a side of Murong Chong that he admired. Xiang Shu’s own relatives, his anda, the people he cared about—most of them had died as well. In this, he and Murong Chong were the same.

Feng Qianjun remained silent, but privately, he agreed with Murong Chong. That Chen Xing did too went without saying.

“Well, now. In my humble opinion, we’re all on the same side.”

“Correct,” Murong Chong said. “You’re Xie Anshi?”

Xie An smiled with good grace. He didn’t deny it—in fact, he nodded liberally. “The young always overtake the old.”

Murong Chong’s tone grew dark. “You are an important official from another nation. Have you thought about the consequences of entering hostile territory? What if I decide to keep you here in Luoyang as a hostage?”

“The sons of Jiangnan have strived to grow stronger for many years now, but never because of the might of just one individual,” Xie An said smilingly. “That is to say, even if His Majesty met his demise, our Great Jin would still pick up arms against Fu Jian. But Murong-daren, think of the situation in the north. What would happen if Fu Jian vanished overnight? What consequences would that have? That is the difference between our two sides.”

For a moment, no one spoke. Xie An’s light tone had not softened the weight of his words, nor masked the strong conviction he held, despite Fu

Jian’s imminent plans to bring the force of his great army to bear on the Jin.

Having given his words time to sink in, Xie An went on, “Let’s discuss, in detail, how to disrupt Wang Ziye’s plans. That is, after all, what our emperor is currently most concerned about. If we level the playing field by eliminating Fu Jian’s drought fiend army before he can use it, I’m confident we’ll win.”

“I thought you were here to parley,” said Murong Chong.

“It would certainly be best if we could engage in peace talks,” Xie An said pleasantly. “But the destiny of the Divine Land—and the people in it—isn’t ours to control.”

Murong Chong let out a long sigh. Fu Jian had been listening to Wang Ziye’s counsel, and he was poised to declare war any day now. Now…well, Wang Ziye was not actually dead, so it was only a matter of time before he returned to Chang’an and made the situation even more dire.

Murong Chong was silent for a long time. “True,” he said at last. “And I want Jiejie to return to the dust; she’s already died in every way that matters. I don’t want to let Wang Ziye use her again. I’ll get rid of him and that drought fiend army as revenge for my sister.”

“And will you simultaneously declare war against Fu Jian and reestablish your Great Yan?” Xiang Shu asked coldly.

Murong Chong looked at him, and when their gazes met, they both understood each other. Xiang Shu suspected that Murong Chong’s real objective was to take control of the drought fiend army and turn it on the Qin army. He and Murong Chong would likely never reach a compromise if Murong Chong didn’t lay out his plan for them.

“What kind of person do you take me for?” Murong Chong asked.

“All right,” Xiang Shu conceded. “But remember what you’ve said today.”

“How many men do you have?” Murong Chong asked, turning to Xie An.

Xie An spread his palms open and smiled. “A group of not quite twenty.”

Murong Chong blinked. He was asking for Xie An to act as Sima Yao's representative and tell him how many troops the Jin could provide, but Xie An had responded evasively.

"Count me in too," Feng Qianjun said. "With the Feng family's former retainers, we'll be almost three thousand."

"And you, Murong Chong?" Xiang Shu asked. "Why don't you start by telling us what you can provide?"

Murong Chong began to pace anxiously. Until recently, he had been trapped, alone, inside the palace. "My silver-armored cavalry is still stationed at Pingyang. That's twenty thousand fighters I can summon, though in doing so, I'll be burning all my bridges. Fu Jian will not let me off easily. The descendants of my family who were left behind in Chang'an as hostages will be slaughtered—all of them."

Xie An took a moment to think this through. "Assuming we can successfully get rid of Wang Ziye and help Fu Jian recover his clarity of mind, I don't think that will be a problem. The Heavenly Emperor might even thank you for eliminating a traitor and protecting the Qin dynasty."

"That's easy for you to say," Murong Chong said icily, "but Fu Jian is a different person now. He seems to have lost every last shred of his humanity…"

Xie An grinned. "You don't need to worry about that. We have the Heart Lamp, which will help the Heavenly Emperor regain his clarity."

Chen Xing thought about telling Xie An that the Heart Lamp wasn't meant to be used that way, but a stern look from Xiang Shu stopped him. It hit him then that everyone in the room had their own agendas. If they managed to get rid of Wang Ziye and trap Fu Jian, then Jiangnan would not just let Fu Jian waltz on back to Chang'an. That would do nothing but create more trouble for them. And Murong Chong, of course, was astute enough to understand that Xie An was trying to form an alliance.

"The Feng family has three thousand." Murong Chong turned to Xiang Shu. "What about you, Shulü Kong? You're no longer the Great Chanyu."

"I only have myself," Xiang Shu replied easily.

Xie An jumped in. “We also have the exorcist, and he has magical artifacts. Quite a few of them.”

Murong Chong gave Chen Xing a suspicious look. “All we need is for Wang Ziye to show up at an appropriate time,” Chen Xing told him matter-of-factly. “You can leave the rest to us.”

“That still leaves us with only my twenty thousand warriors and the three thousand from the Feng family. You really think twenty-three thousand men can win against Fu Jian’s three hundred thousand drought fiends?”

“Three hundred thousand?!” Chen Xing hadn’t expected that. Where had Wang Ziye found that many corpses?!

“May I remind you,” Xiang Shu said, “that you’ve left me out again. It’s twenty-three thousand and one men.”

“When the time comes, Jiangnan’s Beifu Army will help, but the best it can do is help you hold Fu Jian in check. We have no way to fight back directly against the drought fiend army,” Xie An said. He couldn’t risk it, not after the scare the people of Jiangnan had received from the drought fiend epidemic.

Murong Chong was silent for a long time as he considered his options. Xiang Shu knew that his hesitation stemmed from the fact that the entire Xianbei Murong clan’s survival was at stake. And raising his banner in defiance of Fu Jian might mobilize the Five Hu tribes as well, meaning even more people would be dragged into this.

“Think it over,” Xiang Shu said. “We’ll take our leave.”

But Murong Chong stopped him. “Wait. I’ve decided.”

It wasn’t Xie An who’d convinced him. Murong Chong knew that time was running out, and the Jin people Xie An represented were far away on the south side of the Yangtze; distant water was no use in putting out a nearby fire. No, what convinced him was Xiang Shu. Ever since Shulü Kong took up the title of the Great Chanyu of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant at the age of sixteen, he’d been known far and wide for his prowess at Chi Le Chuan’s hunting grounds. He’d never tasted defeat. Hu youths everywhere admired martial artists, and Xiang Shu seemed to have a stratagem for every situation. Rumors from the land beyond the Great Wall

had it that he never failed to accomplish something he'd agreed to do, and he never went back on his word.

His was the side to be on.

Murong Chong lifted the pitcher and filled five cups with wine. Then he pulled out a dagger, cut open his arm, and let the blood drip into the wine.

No, no, no, Chen Xing thought. *No way. Are we drinking each other's blood to seal our alliance? That looks so painful!*

Feng Qianjun and Xie An copied Murong Chong. Chen Xing grimaced and reached out to take the dagger—but Xiang Shu stopped him.

"I'm counting my blood for the Exorcism Department's share," Xiang Shu said. With that, he cut his arm and let his blood drip into the cups too.

Murong Chong nodded. "May Chi Le Chuan, the Yin Mountains, and the Dragon God of the north stand witness. This is the blood of the Xianbei people."

"The blood of the Han people," Xie An intoned. He seemed to be familiar with this ritual.

"The blood of the Han people, and the blood of the Tiele people," Xiang Shu said, for once acknowledging his half-Han identity. He glanced down and pulled Xiao Shan's hand away from the wine cup. "And the blood of the people north of the Great Wall, the blood of everyone who has made an alliance with the Shulü family, the blood of the Xiongnu, Gaoche, Rouran, and the rest of the Sixteen Hu tribes, as well as the blood of the people of Goguryeo."

Chen Xing blinked, his eyebrows high on his forehead. Xiang Shu was not the Great Chanyu anymore, but Chen Xing remembered now: In the past, when they had formed a similar blood pact in Chi Le Chuan, Xiang Shu had drunk the blood wine of the Hu people. Allying with Xiang Shu meant allying with everyone who had previously forged an alliance with him.

Murong Chong had more to add. "The blood of those south of the Great Wall who formed an alliance with the Xianbei people. The blood of

the Di people, the Jie people, the Xiongnu people, the Qiang people, and everyone else, allied to fight back against the tyrannical Qin. Anyone who breaks this alliance shall be punished by the heavens and we humans alike."

He, Xiang Shu, Feng Qianjun, and Xie An emptied their cups. Before Chen Xing could grab the fifth cup, Xiang Shu drank that too, then flipped the cup over and set it upside down on the table.

"As for the details of the plan," said Xiang Shu, "Xie An will figure it out, and when the time comes, you'll be notified." He shot Murong Chong a look, then indicated to Chen Xing that it was time for them to go.

Now that the alliance was formed, Murong Chong seemed to lose all the strength in his body. He took a laborious step forward, as if nothing else in his whole life had ever been so difficult, and sat down exhaustedly on the edge of the bed to keep Tuoba Yan company.

Chen Xing looked at Tuoba Yan again. He was still unconscious. "I'll come by to check on him when I have some time in the next few days. For now, switch over to the medicine that I'm prescribing, and don't give him anything else from Wang Ziye."

Murong Chong nodded. Chen Xing couldn't see his expression clearly, shadowed as he was, but under that darkness that couldn't be touched by lamplight, he was smiling bitterly.

Chapter 79

XIE AN STUDIED THE MAP, from Chang'an to Luoyang and down to Shouyang and the Jiangnan region. "We don't have enough manpower. His Majesty didn't want to go to war. Before we set out, he specifically instructed us to avoid fighting if possible."

"It's not possible," Chen Xing said. "The north and south are bound to clash sooner or later. But look on the bright side, Xie-shixiong—you have an ally now."

Several days had passed since they swore a blood pact with Murong Chong, and spring had come to Luoyang. It was the second month, the skies were clear, and willow catkins were drifting through the air. Before long the Shangsi Festival would arrive,[4] bringing with it the most beautiful sights of spring in the Central Plains. The warm sunlight enveloping Chen Xing filled him with an irrepressible restlessness. This season and its blossoming flowers put him in no mood to handle official matters—all he wanted was to go out and enjoy himself. But Xie An had dragged him back to the matter at hand so that they could discuss their strategy.

Xiang Shu had thrown this task at Xie An and washed his hands of it, but after much deliberation, Xie An still couldn't put his worries to rest. "Murong Chong only agreed to the alliance because of the Martial God," he said helplessly. "Why would he ever trust us Han people otherwise? Huan Wen and Wang Meng killed plenty of Xianbei. But forget it. Right now, the most crucial part of this plan is figuring out how to lure Fu Jian and Wang Ziye to Luoyang. If we can get them away from their home turf in Chang'an, we'll have a chance."

Chen Xing was gradually coming to realize something: His "shixiong" was actually kind of amazing. Since he joined the Exorcism Department, Xie An had brought order to chaos, methodically organizing everything. He saw every part of the turbulent political landscape with clarity, like a brilliant strategist—and unlike Chen Xing, who often felt as if he were squinting through fog, unable to grasp the full picture.

Xie An had decisively rejected Xiang Shu's proposal to destroy the drought fiends' main camp. If three hundred thousand drought fiends were to rampage out of control and wreak havoc across Luoyang, the consequences would be catastrophic. Moreover, there was a chance that Wang Ziye had already laid a trap in the Longmen Mountains and was waiting for them to walk right into it. The best approach, Xie An argued, was patience—they had to wait for the right moment to strike.

He had repeatedly mapped out troop movements, preparing for the possibility that negotiations might fail and Fu Jian would launch a campaign against Jiangnan; in that event, they could counterattack from both flanks using Murong Chong's Silver Cavalry. But no matter how he calculated it, the numbers were daunting: Together, the Beifu Army and the Silver Cavalry combined barely amounted to a hundred thousand soldiers, far too few compared to the numbers at their enemy's command.

"I'll let you think about it," Chen Xing said, overwhelmed by all the military strategies, maps, and discussions of valley ambushes and plains warfare. He decided to go and find Xiang Shu instead.

Xiang Shu was in the post station's study writing letters. Feng Qianjun and a few of his subordinates stood nearby, waiting for him. Chen Xing arrived just as Xiang Shu sealed the last letter with wax and handed the three letters to the courier.

"You're sending letters to Chi Le Chuan?" Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu ignored him and addressed the courier. "You must keep these letters from falling into the wrong hands, even if it costs you your life."

The courier nodded solemnly. Feng Qianjun took one of the letters and turned to Chen Xing. "See you later, Tianchi," he said, and left.

"What? Where's he going?" Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu didn't respond to that either. He washed his hands and headed for the door. "Where's Xiao Shan?"

Xiao Shan was lying in the courtyard, basking in the sun. Chen Xing followed close behind Xiang Shu. "What did you send Feng-dage to do?"

“I told him to find a way to stall Fu Jian. Wolf cub, get up and get to work.”

Xiao Shan rolled over lazily, then sat up with a fierce look on his face. He still didn’t talk much, and he was only ever docile when he was with Xiang Shu and Chen Xing. Sometimes, watching them, Chen Xing felt like Xiang Shu and Xiao Shan were father and son. If Xiang Shu had a son one day, they’d probably interact just like this.

Xiang Shu and Xiao Shan mounted their horses at the post station. Xiang Shu had an impatient air about him, as if he was waiting for Chen Xing.

“Where are we going?” Chen Xing asked.

“No idea,” Xiao Shan said, looking confused.

“Are you coming or not?” said Xiang Shu. “If not, I’m leaving.”

“Wait!”

Chen Xing hurried after him. Xiang Shu rode ahead a short distance, then stopped to wait, but he set off again just before Chen Xing could catch up. Chen Xing chased him through the streets for a while before getting fed up and stopping to glare at him from afar.

“Get on,” Xiang Shu said finally, stopping again. This time, he let Chen Xing catch up. Chen Xing climbed onto the horse, wrapped his arms around Xiang Shu’s waist, and let him take them out of Luoyang, following the official road north.

“The city guards are watching us,” Chen Xing remarked.

“I know,” Xiang Shu said. “If they want to mess with me, they can go ahead and try.”

Chen Xing surmised that Xiang Shu wanted to scout the Longmen Mountains, and sure enough, after they left Luoyang and rode for half a day, they ultimately arrived at the mouth of Longmen Gorge. Longmen had historically borne the name Yique, the Gate of the Yi River. In early spring, mist shrouded the mountain forests, and the damp air was bitterly cold. The three of them followed the Yi River along its eastern bank, and as they approached their destination, they saw that the river ahead flowed between

two mountains, which stood to either side like a gateway. At the foot of the mountains, vast, fertile plains stretched out as far as the eye could see, all lush, swaying grass and orioles flitting through the air. This had once been thriving farmland, but after years of conflict and war, it lay abandoned, untouched by human hands.

“What do you see?” Xiang Shu asked.

“Earth veins,” Chen Xing said. “A crucial nexus where the earth’s energy flows through the Divine Land, connecting north and south.”

“From Carosha to Karakorum, then to Chi Le Chuan—these places align with the handle of the Northern Dipper. And from Yique, the path extends into the four places in the Central Plains.”

“Right. This is the spot where the ladle’s handle and body connect in the Ten Thousand Spirits Array.”

A faint, lingering hint of resentment hung in the air around them. The twin peaks of Longmen channeled a cold, biting wind across the plains, running north to south like an open corridor. Before the Silence of All Magic, this place would have been the human realm’s greatest spiritual sanctuary.

Xiang Shu dismounted and removed a travel bag from his horse. The bag contained dried rations, and the three of them sat together by the riverbank to eat.

“There are birds,” Chen Xing noted. He couldn’t shake the feeling that they had wandered right into Wang Ziye’s stronghold. Still, the man himself remained unseen. What was he plotting?

“Xiao Shan,” Xiang Shu said. Xiao Shan took out a slingshot, picked up a smooth river stone, and took aim, but the birds on the plain took flight before he could release it.

“Don’t be so tense,” Chen Xing said. “They’re not crows. I’m not worried about being watched—Wang Ziye has lost too much of his power. What worries me is…”

He recalled what Gu Qing had said before her death—Wang Ziye intended to open “that gate.” But where was it?

“You’re not afraid of death,” Xiang Shu said, “but you’re afraid of Wang Ziye?”

In truth, Chen Xing was more afraid of the plan failing, but he didn’t want to bring that up again.

After their meal, Xiang Shu and Xiao Shan stood by the riverbank together, one tall, one short, picking up pebbles to skip across the water. Xiang Shu selected the flat ones and showed Xiao Shan how to use just the right amount of force to make the stones go farther.

Over the past year, Xiao Shan had grown a great deal. He was now as tall as Xiang Shu’s shoulders, nearly level with Chen Xing’s eyebrows. He had to be close to fourteen now; at this rate, he could grow even taller than Xiang Shu by the time he was seventeen or eighteen. When Xiang Shu had free time, he sometimes sparred with Xiao Shan. At first he always sent Xiao Shan stumbling in all directions; he couldn’t even touch the hem of Xiang Shu’s robes. But little by little, Xiao Shan had improved—though he still couldn’t last more than a few moves.

Suddenly, they both stopped what they were doing. They’d spotted something by the riverbank.

“Don’t touch it,” Xiang Shu warned.

“Chen Xing!” Xiao Shan called. “Come here!”

Confused, Chen Xing got up and quickly walked over to the riverbank. A decayed corpse was drifting downstream. “We need to pull it out,” Chen Xing said immediately. “If it contaminates the water, the villages downstream could face an outbreak of disease.”

Xiang Shu retrieved a grappling hook and dragged the corpse ashore. Chen Xing examined it, frowning. Judging by the armor, it was a Qin soldier. The man’s head had been completely destroyed, as if something had smashed through it with a single blow.

“Struck by rocks?” Chen Xing looked toward the upper reaches of the Yi River, still frowning.

Xiao Shan raised his fist and gestured toward the corpse, then looked at Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu nodded. “A punch. Who has that kind of strength?”

They wasted no more time. Xiang Shu turned, swung onto his horse, whistled, and galloped upstream with Chen Xing.

The closer they got to the mountain pass, the denser the resentment became, a thick, eerie chill in the air. When their path at the base of the mountain reached a dead end, Xiang Shu found a mountain trail and led them up the slopes. As they ascended, the lingering resentment grew so dense it congealed into a white mist.

Up ahead, they spotted a Qin military camp. The faint sound of intermittent coughing drifted through the air.

“Living people,” said Chen Xing.

Rumor had it that Wang Ziye had set up a camp of drought fiend soldiers in these mountains and that Fu Jian had troops guarding it to prevent Jin scouts from approaching. It seemed this was the place. Beyond the camp, there was an expansive stretch of forest from which resentment was surging skyward on both sides. It was just beyond the northern base of Yique, the gap between the two mountains that looked like a massive “Dragon Gate.”

“Let’s go,” Xiang Shu said. Now that he had pinpointed the exact location, he had no desire to get any closer. But Chen Xing, seated behind him on the horse, was frowning thoughtfully at Yique, pondering the gate that Gu Qing had glimpsed in Wang Ziye’s memories before her death. “What?” asked Xiang Shu. “You want to go in and take a look?”

Chen Xing shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

But a bold idea took root in his mind. If the world had still had its mana, was it possible that a powerful spell could split this place open and reveal a radiant gateway bursting with light?

The next day, Xie An finalized his plan and explained it to everyone else. It turned out that while he had drafted the details, it was Xiang Shu who had the final say on the actual strategy.

“Based on the Martial God’s assessment, our final showdown with Fu Jian and Wang Ziye will need to take place in Luoyang,” Xie An said. “The

crucial first step is to lure them both here. Earlier today, Helian Shuang sent someone to notify us that Fu Jian will arrive in Luoyang to meet with us on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival."[5]

"Good," Xiang Shu said, sitting in the post station's main seat.

"Feng Qianjun is still away," Xie An said. "What should we do about his three thousand fighters?"

"No need to wait for him. When the time comes, he'll return. Follow your plan."

"As for Wang Ziye, I see two possibilities. The first is that he's with Fu Jian and they will arrive together, and the second is that he's hiding in the shadows. During the negotiations, we will need to mobilize our forces and act quickly to trap Fu Jian."

Xiang Shu grunted in acknowledgment. Privately, Chen Xing was surprised they weren't making a bigger deal of this. Holding the ruler of a nation under house arrest wasn't something to be taken lightly. Could they really do that? Wouldn't Fu Jian have guards with him? But when he thought it over—when he considered Xiang Shu's abilities—he decided that it was doable.

Still…

"If we trap him," said Chen Xing, "then Wang Ziye can't capture him to use him as Chiyou's vessel. Trapping him sounds easy, but you have to consider the imperial guard…"

"Leave it to me," Xiang Shu told him. "Don't worry."

"Fu Jian will bring at least twenty or thirty thousand soldiers with him when he comes to Luoyang for the negotiations."

"I said! Don't worry! What part of that don't you understand?"

Xie An cut back in smoothly. "Once we've successfully trapped him, Murong Chong will launch an attack on Wang Ziye under the pretext of purging the emperor's court of traitors. Next, we must eliminate Wang Ziye's drought fiend army. We'll need to allocate a portion of our forces to escort Fu Jian away—"

"To Jiankang? Are we parading him through the streets?" asked Xiang Shu.

Xie An chuckled. “I promised you, and I’ll keep my word: We won’t hand him over to His Majesty. For the time being, we’ll hold him in Shouyang, south of the Fei River.”

Chen Xing knew that, in the end, there was still some lingering sentiment between Xiang Shu and Fu Jian. Xiang Shu didn’t want to see Fu Jian humiliated.

“After this, the Murong clan will have no choice but to follow Murong Chong into battle,” Xie An went on. “This was part of our plan when we persuaded Murong Chong to form an alliance. We need their army to help us deal with Wang Ziye’s drought fiend forces in the Longmen Mountains. Have you—”

“We’ve pinpointed their exact location,” Xiang Shu confirmed.

“During the negotiations, we’ll have Feng Qianjun’s people secretly infiltrate the area. They’ll use flaming oils and fire jars to clear them out. If it’s necessary to ensure the safety of the people, we may have to set the entire mountain range ablaze. This operation won’t necessarily go smoothly, so we must prepare for the possibility of the drought fiend army swarming out of the mountains before they’ve all been burned. If that happens, the Murong forces will have to act.”

“What about Wang Ziye? We can’t underestimate him. The moment he senses something wrong, he’ll strike at us,” Chen Xing said. “We dealt with that jiao, but I suspect he still has other cards up his sleeve. If he resurrects some other bizarre, monstrous creature we’ve never even seen before, we’ll be in trouble.”

Xie An nodded. “Yes, that’s the problem you’ll have to face. He no longer has the drought fiend kings at his disposal, and our thorough reconnaissance hasn’t turned up any other officials in Luoyang who might be drought fiends in disguise. Based on our analysis, Shi Hai’s troops and generals have mostly been wiped out—those at the military camp in the Longmen Mountains are his last remaining forces. We’re certain that the only person still under his control is Princess Qinghe.” But as he spoke, he frowned, looking troubled. “The Feng family’s scouts have thoroughly searched the area around the Longmen Mountains, except for the place the drought fiend army is stationed. They’ve scoured it inside and out but

haven’t found any suspicious caves or altars. Where could Wang Ziye’s ‘gate’ be?”

“Could it be in the drought fiend camp?” Chen Xing asked, but Xie An shook his head.

“The drought fiend camp is in a gorge. Based on our observations, there’s nothing out of the ordinary in there except for the resentment. The only unknown variable now is that ‘gate.’ We can’t afford to have any demons or monsters unleashed from it at the last moment.”

Xiang Shu unfolded a map, a hand-drawn chart made by Zhang Liu. At the center of the map was Yique, where the two mountains opened wide.

“This is the location marked by Zhang Liu,” Xiang Shu muttered, “so there shouldn’t be any monsters. I suspect the place Wang Ziye wants to enter is more likely connected to the Dinghai Pearl. Besides, even if he did revive some other monstrous beast, I don’t think it would be harder to deal with than the jiao.”

Chen Xing gave this some thought. “Then how are we going to return the Dinghai Pearl to him?”

The station fell silent. Xie An and Xiang Shu exchanged glances. “Why must we give the Dinghai Pearl back to him?” asked Xie An.

“Because if we don’t, we won’t be able to release the mana inside it and eliminate Chiyou.”

“Our goal is to eradicate Wang Ziye so that he can no longer create the drought fiends,” Xie An said. “The Martial God is confident in his ability to eliminate Wang Ziye in this battle, so we shouldn’t need to pay such a heavy price—”

“When the time comes, I’ll act accordingly,” Xiang Shu said. “I can attempt to use the Dinghai Pearl and then pretend to faint from soul exhaustion. Wang Ziye will try to seize the Dinghai Pearl then, because by this point, we’ll have captured Fu Jian and destroyed his drought fiends, and the Murong family will view him as their enemy—all his tricks will have been exhausted. This artifact will be his only hope.”

Chen Xing hummed thoughtfully. It sounded plausible. “Once he has the Dinghai Pearl, he’ll return to Huanmo Palace to revive Chiyou, because

he'll be out of other options. But how will we find out where Huanmo Palace is? How will we know where to go?"

Clearly, Xiang Shu hadn't thought about this part yet. Chen Xing had a sense that Xiang Shu was trying to reassure him, but he'd always known that things wouldn't be so simple. That confirmed it, then: Xiang Shu hadn't seriously considered the proposal from that night, even though he was the one who came up with it.

"Think it over some more," Chen Xing said softly.

Xie An glanced at Xiang Shu, who fell silent, knowing that Chen Xing had guessed his thoughts. Chen Xing didn't press further. Making this decision might've been even harder for Xiang Shu than it was for him, but it had to be done.

In the blink of an eye, it was early spring in the third lunar month. Less than a year and a half remained until Chen Xing's twentieth birthday.

"From what you've observed, Wang Ziye has habitually used the earth veins to move around," Xie An said. "His soul can leave his body and possess other people's, but if he carries the Dinghai Pearl, he'll need to move in his physical form."

"Huanmo Palace is at the Fei River," Xiang Shu said in a low voice. "Before she passed, Gu Qing said that Wang Ziye wouldn't let anyone but his own subordinates inside…and when I hold the pearl, sometimes I suspect it might not even be the real Dinghai Pearl at all."

"If you consider my proposal carefully, you'll see that while it's risky, it's feasible."

Xiang Shu's tone grew icy. "I won't let Chen Xing fall into his hands. In our current plan, he'll be taken to Huanmo Palace, but I'll still be able to find him with our resonance through the Heart Lamp. But if he really dies…then what's the point of all this?"

"But this is what Shidi wants," Xie An said seriously. "Great Chanyu, do you know why the Hu people have been around for so many years yet have never truly set foot in the south?"

Xiang Shu stared at Xie An, his brow furrowing with irritation.

Xie An smiled. “Because not even Fu Jian can shake a belief so strong it’s almost ardent faith.” He sighed and stood up. “Even after the Yongjia Rebellion, when our path ahead was shrouded in darkness, there were many other Han who lit the way for us. Whether it’s exorcising demons or restoring our homeland, it’s the same. I’ve seen that look in Shidi’s eyes countless times. He’s not the only one. They live for this ideal and are willing to die for it as well—to sacrifice themselves for what they believe is right, to give up their lives for justice.”

There was a loud crash behind him. Xiang Shu had overturned the table and stormed out, leaving the door open for a gust of wind to blow through.

But before Xiang Shu could find something to destroy to vent his anger, he stopped short. “Move through the earth veins?” he muttered.

That night, Xiao Shan handed Chen Xing a letter. “It’s for you.”

Chen Xing blinked. Someone sent him a letter? He opened it and saw a few lines of somewhat wobbly Han characters followed by Tuoba Yan’s signature. He couldn’t help but recall the days in Chang’an when Tuoba Yan first learned to write Han characters. Chen Xing had made him write “trudging on and on” for the first time. Now he knew a good number of characters and could write a complete letter.

Chen Xing showed Xiao Shan the letter. “Look, your shixiong’s handwriting is nicer than yours.”

“Are you going?” Xiao Shan asked.

Chen Xing paused. Tuoba Yan’s letter was an invitation for them to meet. “Now?” he asked, a bit confused. He didn’t really want to go. Xiao Shan gestured outside, implying that Tuoba Yan had already arrived. “Well, I’ll go listen to what he has to say. It’s just for a little while. It’ll be fine.”

Xiao Shan hesitated, but Chen Xing had already stepped out. He watched uneasily as Chen Xing left, unsure whether he should trail after him. Xiang Shu approached quickly from the direction of the hall, frowned, and followed Chen Xing out the door.

The moon bathed Luoyang in warm, gentle light. Tuoba Yan was standing beneath a tree waiting for him, accompanied by a tall man wearing a conical hat. The hat's brim was lowered to cover half of the man's face, but Chen Xing recognized his figure instantly. It was Murong Chong.

"He's here," Murong Chong said. "I'm leaving."

Tuoba Yan immediately turned around. "I knew you'd come," he said. The sight of him smiling at Chen Xing in front of the Luo River was truly picturesque.

"You seem to be doing much better," Chen Xing observed.

"You're right. After the spring, I started to get better."

Tuoba Yan had lost some more weight, but he was his handsome young self again, and his complexion had improved. Chen Xing began to doubt the conclusions he'd reached before. Had the Heart Lamp really helped improve Tuoba Yan's condition? He grasped Tuoba Yan's wrist and channeled the Heart Lamp's energy into Tuoba Yan's body. He frowned. There was no improvement.

The leaves on the willows by the river fluttered like snowflakes in the night wind. As Chen Xing released Tuoba Yan's wrist, he noticed a figure nearby: Xiang Shu, talking to Murong Chong not far away. *Why did he follow me out again?*

"What did you want to talk about?" Chen Xing asked Tuoba Yan, a little distracted.

"Shall we take a walk?" Tuoba Yan suggested.

Murong Chong left and Xiang Shu came over to them. Chen Xing turned to say something to him, but Xiang Shu beat him to it. "I won't eavesdrop," he said coolly. "I'll keep twenty steps away at all times."

"You can just go back," Chen Xing said. "It's just for a short while, nothing will happen!"

But Xiang Shu stubbornly followed. Chen Xing knew Xiang Shu was insistent on staying to monitor him and make sure he didn't get kidnapped again, so he resigned himself to being chaperoned.

Chapter 80

“THE GREAT CHANYU gets anxious the moment you’re out of his sight. Should we invite him over?” Tuoba Yan asked.

Chen Xing waved a hand, dismissing this. “What’s on your mind?”

Tuoba Yan had picked an unfortunate time to seek him out. Chen Xing was a little on edge, and he worried his gloomy feelings would rub off on Tuoba Yan. They walked together along the bank of the Luo River, passing under the falling poplar tree blossoms.

Reaching out his long, slender fingers, Tuoba Yan brushed aside a blossom that had fallen on Chen Xing’s shoulder. “I want to ask something of you, Tianchi.”

Chen Xing raised an eyebrow. He had no idea where this was going.

Tuoba Yan thought for a moment. “I lost my father when I was young,” he said at last, “and His Majesty has treated me like a son. I…I know that I am in no place to say this, but…”

“I understand. Fu Jian treats you very well.” Chen Xing had seen it: Fu Jian had used his status as a ruler to personally help Tuoba Yan broach the delicate subject of a marriage offer, even at risk of offending the Great Chanyu. The significance of that gesture hadn’t escaped Chen Xing, and it had stuck with him. Fu Jian must have been fond of Tuoba Yan indeed.

“I do not wish to see His Majesty controlled by Wang Ziye, nor do I wish to see him disgraced,” Tuoba Yan said. “If it’s possible, I’d like to go back and lead the imperial army in defense of His Majesty. Could you pass my request on to the Great Chanyu, that he return His Majesty to us when the time comes?”

Chen Xing made an affirmative sound, thinking about the fact that Xiang Shu and Fu Jian were old acquaintances. Xiang Shu wouldn’t let Fu Jian be disgraced either. The only issue was that Xie An had no such compunctions; he represented his country’s interests, and if an opportunity arose for him to strike a harsh blow against Fu Jian, he would have to take it.

“Xiang Shu will be amenable to that request,” Chen Xing assured him. “My shixiong might not be, but I’ll find a way. As long as we can get rid of Wang Ziye, Xiang Shu will return Fu Jian to you. He won’t let him fall into the hands of the Han people. Besides, it remains to be seen who’s going to have the upper hand.”

Tuoba Yan smiled. “I will do my best to protect you all.”

If Tuoba Yan could talk them into rebelling, the imperial guard would become a powerful piece on the board. It remained to be seen, though, how many people in the army would be able to distinguish right from wrong, defy Fu Jian’s orders, and pledge their allegiance to Tuoba Yan.

“Xiang Shu!” Chen Xing called out. Xiang Shu was standing on the shore, his head lowered to watch the stream. Chen Xing moved closer to him, still feeling a little gloomy because Xiang Shu had lied to him. “What we were just talking about…”

He knew Xiang Shu had heard him; he and Xiao Shan both had such exceptionally keen hearing they could sense his approach from a few dozen steps away when he walked from the east wing to the west wing.

But Xiang Shu protested, “I really didn’t hear a thing. What kind of person do you take me for? Talk about whatever you want; I’m not interested in your affairs.” He sounded annoyed.

Tuoba Yan smiled awkwardly, evidently still remembering what had happened under that tree in Chi Le Chuan. He waved his hand to tell Chen Xing not to argue.

Chen Xing didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Instead of doing either, he asked, “Then what are you doing?”

“I’m thinking about things,” Xiang Shu said. “I don’t care what you two talk about; keep talking.”

“What are you thinking about?” Chen Xing couldn’t resist needling him. “You want to go take a bath in the river?”

“I’m thinking about throwing you into the river!”

When he asked Chen Xing out for a conversation in the dead of night, Tuoba Yan hadn’t expected to become a spectator to Chen Xing and Xiang Shu’s bickering. He had no idea what to say. Giving up, Chen Xing left

Xiang Shu to his own devices and went back to walking shoulder to shoulder with Tuoba Yan in a circle around the poplar tree grove.

When they turned and walked away from him, Xiang Shu furtively sniffed at himself, then began to follow them again.

“Is that the only thing you wanted to talk about?” Chen Xing asked Tuoba Yan, smiling. “Was it worth you making a special trip over here in the middle of the night? The answer would have been the same if we just talked about this during the day when you had free time.”

Tuoba Yan began to smile too. “It’s because His Majesty is like my father. He’s my only kin.”

Chen Xing thought that over. He understood Tuoba Yan’s feelings. Xiang Shu didn’t want to disgrace Fu Jian either, nor did he have any intentions of handing him over to the Han. His intentions in this were the same as Tuoba Yan’s.

“I’ll find a moment to discuss it with Xiang Shu,” Chen Xing promised.

Tuoba Yan stood in the middle of the street. “It’s getting late; you should go back,” he said, gesturing at Chen Xing. Chen Xing nodded and patted his arm, and at the other end of the street, Xiang Shu stopped walking.

Xiang Shu, Chen Xing saw, wore his usual brooding expression, thinking about who knew what. When he noticed Chen Xing coming back, he turned on his heel and left without waiting for him.

After they returned to the courtyard, Xiao Shan stared at Chen Xing curiously. Chen Xing thought for a bit, then asked, “Xiao Shan, what did Tuoba Yan ask that day?”

“Nothing much. He was just asking how you and Gege were, where you guys went, and what you guys did.”

“Gege?” Chen Xing asked, surprised. “Whose gege? You have a gege?”

Xiao Shan pointed toward the hall of the inn, and Chen Xing understood—he was talking about Xiang Shu. “You call him Gege?” he

asked, amused.

“I didn’t know what to call him, so he told me to call him Gege.”

Chen Xing hadn’t thought Xiang Shu had it in him! He sat down. “You told Tuoba Yan everything?”

Xiao Shan was lying facing the moon in the sky, his head pillowed on his arms. He turned his head sideways to look at Chen Xing. “I told him that when you were sleeping, Gege took off his clothes and got on the bed to attack you—”

Chen Xing’s brain exploded. “*What?!*” he asked frantically. “What are you saying?”

So Xiao Shan briefly sketched out the scene he saw that day, when Chen Xing had fallen unconscious and Xiang Shu carried him in his arms.

“Why didn’t I know about this?!” Chen Xing asked in disbelief.

Xiao Shan gave him a strange look. “You were sleeping. Of course you wouldn’t know.”

A flicker of embarrassment crossed Chen Xing’s face. “What then?”

“I didn’t keep watching, so I don’t know.”

Chen Xing grabbed Xiao Shan’s collar. “Why didn’t you keep watching?!”

“He wouldn’t let me watch! He threatened to hit me!”

Chen Xing put one hand on his forehead. “Such an important matter and you never told me?”

“Is it important?” Xiao Shan asked. His tone was just like Xiang Shu’s—he answered every question with a mocking question of his own.

“Stop learning things from him,” Chen Xing told him sternly. “You’re learning all the wrong things! You two keep going around all day like other people owe you money! Has he bought you off? No wonder I see him teaching you martial arts all the time…”

“He said if there came a day when he died, I should protect you well.”

Chen Xing stared at him for a long, silent moment. “Oh… H-he did? But how could he die? There’s no way… How is it even possible for someone who can fight like he can? Xiao Shan, I want to ask you… Um…” What exactly was Xiang Shu thinking about every day? Tears pricked at Chen Xing’s eyes. He glanced at Xiao Shan and abruptly changed his mind. “It’s nothing.”

But Xiao Shan wasn't done. "I told him that you don't need protection, but he insisted that you do. He said that you're very lonely, more lonely than anyone else. You haven't seen the good things in life and you have no family left. From the day he met you, you've never been truly happy."

A smile came over Chen Xing's face. "That's not true. I'm pretty happy right now, aren't I?" he asked, stroking Xiao Shan's head.

Xiao Shan scrutinized Chen Xing's face. "No. You're just like Lu Ying, like someone who's going to die tomorrow. Even when you smile, it's a little sad."

Chen Xing had no idea what to say to that.

Ah, whatever, he thought. *You two are too good at reading people. But I still have another year and then some, okay! Don't curse me with all this "if I die tomorrow" nonsense. Bah!*

Xiao Shan had given him an ocean's worth of information, and Chen Xing spent that night tossing and turning in bed as he tried to process it all. What exactly had Xiang Shu done when Chen Xing was in that coma? He hadn't sensed anything out of the ordinary! He wanted to just get up and ask Xiang Shu, but he was certain that would only make things even more awkward.

Eventually, there was a knock on the door.

"Are you asleep?" Xiang Shu asked. "I want to tell you something, Chen Xing."

Chen Xing was already off-kilter after everything Xiao Shan had told him. He fully intended to ignore Xiang Shu, but then Xiang Shu just shoved the door open and walked into the room.

"You…" Chen Xing frowned. "I didn't say you could come in yet!"

He rose and sat on the edge of the bed, wearing only his underpants. Xiang Shu was wearing a set of long pants, but his arms and torso were bare like Chen Xing's. Droplets of cold water clung to his face and body, as if he had just washed his face with well water to clear his head.

“What did Tuoba Yan say to you this time?” Xiang Shu asked, his tone suspicious. Chen Xing relayed Tuoba Yan’s request to him, and he nodded curtly. “Got it.”

“Is that okay?” Chen Xing asked. “I was guessing that was also what you—”

“I said, I got it!” said Xiang Shu impatiently. “Do you not understand what ‘I got it’ means?”

Chen Xing did, of course. Xiang Shu meant “yes.” He didn’t want to get himself beaten up, so he dropped it. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Earlier, when we were outside, were you telling me to go take a bath?”

“You too? In the middle of the night? Have every single one of you lost your minds? You came here to talk to me about taking a bath?”

“It’s not that!” Xiang Shu snapped, getting annoyed again.

Chen Xing prodded him along. “Hurry up. And when you’re done, go back and get some sleep. Do you realize what time it is?”

This seemed to infuriate Xiang Shu somehow. He clenched his fist. “You…”

“Are you crazy? You woke me up in the middle of the night to hit me?”

Xiang Shu tried to suppress his rage, but he was seething. This brat was happy to chat away with Tuoba Yan for ages, completely unconcerned with how much time they were wasting, but he shooed Xiang Shu away the moment he arrived. Xiang Shu was so angry he felt like he might die from it. He turned to leave, but when he reached the bedroom door, he changed his mind.

“I’ll say my piece,” he said darkly. “It’s up to you whether you want to listen.”

Chen Xing had taken the opportunity, when Xiang Shu turned away, to ogle his half-naked body. Now, realizing Xiang Shu was about to turn back around, he averted his gaze and hastily arranged his features into the wounded expression of someone who’d been wronged. “Then say it! I didn’t tell you not to!”

Xiang Shu walked a few steps back into the room and glanced at Chen Xing. When he saw Chen Xing giving him a strange, mute look back, he finally let go of his anger. “Earlier, I was discussing some things with Xie An,” he said testily. “When he mentioned Shi Hai being able to travel through the earth veins, I thought of something.”

“Oh?”

Xiang Shu joined Chen Xing on the side of the bed. “I thought of a strategy, but I don’t know if it’ll be successful. It’s based on the assumption that Wang Ziye’s soul can leave his body and move around freely. Let me organize my thoughts a bit…”

“You want to use the earth veins to follow Wang Ziye and sneak into Huanmo Palace, right? If I can be blunt, though, only spiritual bodies can pass through the earth veins. It’ll never work unless we somehow manage to let go of our physical forms.”

“What is the soul possession technique?” Xiang Shu asked suddenly.

Chen Xing thought for a moment. This was something he had learned about before. “The soul possession technique he used has been recorded in the historical annals. After death, the souls of some exceptionally powerful ghostly beings can possess living people or temporarily take control of deceased bodies.”

“So that is indeed the method Wang Ziye’s been using. That day when Xie An drugged the person he was possessing, the black smoke that was expelled from the body—that was his three immortal souls and seven mortal forms.”

Chen Xing furrowed his brow and nodded. “Yes—technically speaking, he probably counts as a ghost, or perhaps as a wandering soul that’s independently roaming the human realm. There are a lot of things I’ve been wondering about with him, like why he hasn’t been absorbed into the divine vein and returned to samsara like other souls are after death… Perhaps he used the resentment in the human realm and the blood of the Demon God to refine himself so that his soul can leave his body and move about freely.”

After humans died, their three immortal souls and seven mortal forms quickly vanished from the world, sucked into the divine veins so that they

could enter samsara and be reborn. The resentment and regret within each soul was supposed to be cleansed by the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth; when resentment and spiritual qi collided, they canceled each other out. But with the power of the Dinghai Pearl, Zhang Liu had taken away all spiritual qi, and so now there was nothing to cleanse the resentment. The resentment that Wang Ziye had gathered was actually a kind of defensive measure.

"This supports my conjecture that his essence is still that of a human soul," Xiang Shu said. "That's also why he can transport himself through the earth veins and appear thousands of miles away. The earth veins can only accept the power of a soul."

"Correct," Chen Xing said. "That's the logical conclusion. You're smart, Xiang Shu—you got this far with no guidance, and you actually managed to figure out Shi Hai's original form."

By this point, Xiang Shu had spent a lot of time studying the Xiang family's ancient records; he knew a lot about the world of exorcists. Without thinking, he lifted his hand and put it on Chen Xing's bare shoulder. "Is there no method that exists for getting rid of a soul? Like the transcendence rite that I once told you about."

Chen Xing wanted to say something, but Xiang Shu tightened his grip, squeezing Chen Xing's shoulder to ask Chen Xing to let him finish. Chen Xing's words dried up.

"If we really want to get rid of him completely, we must first expel him from the person or corpse that he's possessing, like Xie An did when he drugged that man," Xiang Shu went on. "Then we'll need a way to immediately prevent him from finding another person to possess, so that he'll appear in front of us in his resentment-drenched original form."

Chen Xing's eyes grew wide. In the dense fog ahead of them, Xiang Shu might actually have found a path that could lead to their final victory. "And after that, I'll use the Heart Lamp to exorcise his resentment!" said Chen Xing. "But he must have absorbed a ton of it over the years. He'll definitely revive dead people or yaoguai to attack us. My safety will be in your hands."

"Yes, your Heart Lamp can exorcise the resentment, but then what? Think about it: After we exhaust all of his resentment, he'll reveal his true

form. That will be the real Wang Ziye, the Wang Ziye with only his three immortal souls and seven mortal forms."

Chen Xing understood. "He'll escape to find a place with a lot of dead people, and with resentment as his fuel, he'll cultivate from the beginning again. It must have taken him hundreds, if not thousands, of years to cultivate his mana like that…"

"Did you forget? We still have an artifact. Now that I think about it, my mother might have kept it specially to defeat him back then."

Realization dawned on Chen Xing. "The Soulfall Bell!" All of the nerves in his body seemed to come alive at once, and a buzzing resounded in his mind.

Xiang Shu nodded. "The Soulfall Bell is designed to deal with souls."

They exchanged a glance, and Chen Xing hummed thoughtfully. "Yes! This is totally possible! We'll try to prevent him from possessing anything, and we'll fight him when he's in his soul state. Once we've made him expend all his resentment, we'll wait for him to return to his original form, then use the Soulfall Bell to take away two of his immortal souls. Without his earth and human souls, he'll have no body to contain his seven mortal forms, and they'll quickly dissipate. The only thing left will be his spiritual soul, which will be quickly sucked away into the divine vein to be reincarnated! And even if it doesn't work out like that, he'll still lose all of the memories stored in his human soul, and he won't be able to remember anything. Yes! Yes! Wow, this is it!"

Xiang Shu seemed less certain. "We still don't know how much resentment he's collected to strengthen himself. We might need to put more thought into how to make him expend it all…"

"Aha ha ha! We can give him a hand! I don't think Xiao Shan and Feng-dage will have any complaints. Wow, how am I this smart?"

Xiang Shu didn't seem to hear Chen Xing praising himself. He was still pondering over the feasibility of the plan.

"Great! This is just great!" Chen Xing shouted, throwing his arms around Xiang Shu in a hug.

Xiang Shu instantly stiffened up. He pulled aside the arm that Chen Xing had wrapped around his neck, but Chen Xing just hugged him even tighter. He turned his head away, his face burning hot. “I haven’t thought it through yet,” he said. “Don’t make such a fuss! Let me think a little more. How are we going to set up a battlefield where he can’t possess anyone?”

Chen Xing had wondered this too. Each time they’d crossed swords, Wang Ziye had been able to escape whenever he wanted to. If he couldn’t win, well, he’d just turn into a meteor and fly away and no one would be able to do anything about it.

Chen Xing and Xiang Shu, who had the power of the Heart Lamp in their bodies, were probably immune to Wang Ziye’s possession trick, and being exorcists, Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun likely had strong souls as well. But Wang Ziye could go anywhere. He’d be able to find a mortal or two within a hundred miles of them. He could possess them and go into hiding, and they’d never be able to find him.

“Right.” Chen Xing frowned. “We can’t build a defensive array either, since we can’t draw on the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth—”

“This is why I said you shouldn’t interrupt!” Xiang Shu burst out, vexed. “I have the solution! It’s the Yin Yang Mirror!”

Chen Xing fell silent. In the span of a few seconds, his emotions had soared into the sky and then plummeted back to earth, only to be launched back into the air again. Ultimately, he was so awed by Xiang Shu that he was ready to get down on his hands and knees in admiration.

“But the burden you’ll have to shoulder will be hefty,” Xiang Shu added. “Not only will you have to activate the Soulfall Bell, you’ll have to control the Yin Yang Mirror at the same time…”

“That won’t be a problem,” Chen Xing assured him. “I’ll use the Yin Yang Mirror first and send all of us plus Wang Ziye into it. Then we can fight him to the end in the mirror realm’s Chang’an. Xiang Shu…you really are so smart!”

Xiang Shu turned his head and gave Chen Xing a look. They were both silent for a time, and Chen Xing’s brow furrowed again as he thought about the various possible outcomes of going toe to toe with Wang Ziye. It

was easy enough for them to say that they'd force him to expend all his resentment, but the actual process would be complicated.

Xiang Shu lifted his hand and touched his index and middle fingers to the corner of Chen Xing's red lips, casually brushing his thumb over the corner of his mouth. Then he stood up. "See, I said there'd be a way. I'll think more on the specifics. You can stop worrying."

That touch had been was so quick that Chen Xing barely had time to register it before Xiang Shu straightened his trousers and left. In his wake, Chen Xing stayed staring off into space. How were they going to deal with Chiyou after that? Then again, maybe getting rid of Wang Ziye would change the playing field drastically…

Chen Xing absently rubbed the corner of his mouth. The spot Xiang Shu's fingers had touched still felt warm.

For the next several days, uncertainty gripped Chen Xing every time he saw Xiang Shu, though Xiang Shu, for his part, seemed a lot less preoccupied than before. The two of them seemed to have come to a tacit understanding, and avoided being alone together whenever possible.

Xie An sensed something had changed between them, but of course, he didn't comment on it. He stuck to regularly discussing the details of the ambush on Fu Jian with Xiang Shu. They turned the plan over and over, mapping out every eventuality of Fu Jian coming to Luoyang for diplomatic talks. It was also important to hammer out exactly where the Pingyang Army and Feng Qianjun's subordinates would hide.

Every day, Xiang Shu had to listen to Xie An bring up countless new possibilities and then overturn them all, one by one. Even if he were possessed of an unearthly patience, he would have been sick of this man's company. "Xie An, there's no way we'll have to deal with such unexpected circumstances."

"When people get old, they get long-winded," Xie An said. "You'll have to excuse me, Martial God."

Luoyang had fifty thousand defenders, most of whom were locally conscripted troops. Compared to Fu Jian's seasoned, highly trained imperial guard, their impact was likely to be negligible. And Fu Jian was not going

to come alone to meet with them; he would bring at least twenty thousand guards with him.

Their mission was to gain control over Fu Jian during the diplomatic talks, take over the city of Luoyang, and then go on the offensive to protect the city. Murong Chong, Tuoba Yan, and Xiang Shu would lead the troops out to the mountains to torch the drought fiend army camped below the Longmen Gorge and, in doing so, draw Wang Ziye out for a direct confrontation.

Wang Ziye's jiao was gone, and Xiang Shu had spoken to Sima Wei several times to confirm the number and makeup of the enemy's forces—at least those that Sima Wei knew of. In the beginning, the only revived corpses had been the six Jin princes, Feng Qianyi, Zhou Zhen from Chi Le Chuan, and Wen Che and that rotten jiao in Jiangnan. In Chen Xing's last two years of bumbling around, he and Xiang Shu had gotten rid of a guy he'd never met before on Longzhong Mountain, then picked up steam and headed off on a grand journey that had happened to involve whittling away about 80 percent of the enemy's strength. Now, Wang Ziye had a single army left at his disposal and had no choice but to burn his bridges and reveal his true colors to Fu Jian.

"If you put it like that," Xie An said, "this really seems like a blessing from Sui Xing to Xiaoshidi. Look, Wang Ziye had so many pieces on the board at the start of all of this, but they've been chipped away and now he's in a sorry state. It's like they say: Men can make their plans, but the heavens have the last say."

If Chen Xing and Xiang Shu hadn't worked so hard along their journey, Wang Ziye could have easily conquered the entirety of the Divine Land. In addition to the drought fiend army in Luoyang, he would have had Feng Qianyi in Chang'an, the two hundred thousand drought fiends hidden in the Yin Yang Mirror, the Rouran corpse soldiers at the foot of Chi Le Chuan, and the jiao in Jiangnan. Left unchecked, he also could have amassed several million more drought fiends since the battle in Xiangyang. If he had then convinced Fu Jian to wage war against the south and deployed all his forces in that massive conflict, no one could have stood against him.

But Wang Ziye had made one inexplicable misstep that triggered a cascade of others, turning his masterful chess strategy into a chaotic mess. Sometimes Xiang Shu felt that the bastard had brought all his misfortune upon himself.

“Let’s do it just like that,” Xiang Shu said after they’d gone over it all again. “I don’t want to debate with you anymore. The Dragon Boat Festival is almost here.”

Xie An heaved a deep sigh. “I just pray that my Great Jin’s forebears will protect us.”

“Even if we eliminate the drought fiends, there will still be the battle between you mortals to contend with,” Xiang Shu said grimly. “You can ask your ancestors for help again then.”

Chen Xing entered the room at top speed. “There’s a bunch of people outside the city! Fu Jian’s here! Xiang Shu! Xie-shixiong! Do you want to come out and take a look?”

Fu Jian had arrived right on schedule, and it was precisely as Xie An and Xiang Shu had speculated: He had twenty thousand imperial guards with him. The citizens of Luoyang came out to kneel in worship as the procession entered the city. Murong Chong and Tuoba Yan were waiting outside the palace in person to welcome the Great Emperor of the North.

Xiang Shu, Xie An, and the rest didn’t leave the inn, but merely moved to watch from the windows on the second floor. From there, they had a perfect view of Fu Jian riding a warhorse into the city. The first thing the guards did upon their arrival was take over military control of the entire Luoyang area and reassign the defense forces to guard Fu Jian’s safety.

“And here I thought he was a leader who feared neither heaven nor earth,” Xiang Shu sneered.

“It’s all right,” Xie An said, wiping some sweat from his brow. “You see, it’s not a bad thing to plan for every possible eventuality.” He had run through the plan so many times. He had, through Feng Qianjun’s network, contacted every swordfighter hiding in Luoyang to ensure they were all on high alert for the imperial guard’s attempts to weed out spies. This precaution had just proved to be essential.

Xiang Shu took another look. “They’ve replaced the Regular Mounted Attendant,” he said in a disinterested tone. “Do you remember that guy?”

Chen Xing had been standing in front of the window with them for all this time, not speaking. When he saw Yuwen Xin, leading his horse in the procession behind Fu Jian, a hundred emotions stirred in his heart.

“I don’t see Wang Ziye,” Xie An said, changing the topic. “Perhaps he’s not traveling at Fu Jian’s side. When will Qianjun be back?”

Immediately, as it turned out. They heard the sound of movement from downstairs, and Chen Xing went down to find that Feng Qianjun had finally returned from his two-month trip to who knew where. He was covered in dust.

“The matter you asked me to attend to has been taken care of,” Feng Qianjun told Xiang Shu when they’d made their way back up to the second floor.

“What matter?” Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu ignored him. “Number?”

“I did my very best and spent two million of your silver to amass sixty thousand people,” said Feng Qianjun. “I used the rest on flame-throwing mechanisms and flaming oil cans—they’ve already arrived in the west of the city.”

Chen Xing was flabbergasted.

“How about the rest?” asked Xiang Shu.

“While I was camping, I saw lots of troops approaching from the north. They should be arriving at the same time.”

“From both sides?”

“It’s hard to say. We’ll know in a bit.”

“Helian Shuang-daren has arrived,” someone outside the door announced, and Helian Shuang entered the inn, beaming with joy.

“His Majesty has arrived and invites the diplomatic envoy from the south to meet with him tonight for a cup of wine and a welcome reception,” he said. “The meal will be held at a quarter to six…”

Xie An smiled widely. “It is a tremendous honor that His Majesty has come from such a great distance and that he attaches such importance to the diplomatic talks between our two countries. We will definitely—”

“Jiantou will be very busy today,” Xiang Shu interrupted, addressing Helian Shuang. “Are you sure you want to host a banquet tonight?”

Hearing the name “Jiantou” from Xiang Shu’s lips sent Helian Shuang into a fiery rage. He glared at Xiang Shu, this man who to his knowledge was nothing more than a bodyguard to the Han diplomatic envoys. “How dare you! What gives you the…”

As Helian Shuang spoke, the oddness of the situation dawned on him. Fu Jian had just entered the city, and he was already asking to meet this group of diplomats. That was already unconventional, but stranger still, the message from Fu Jian had been very particular—he seemed to be very concerned about something. And while this handsome warrior had barely spoken the last time Helian Shuang met him, everyone else seemed to hold his views in high esteem…

Was it possible this man was actually some kind of big shot Han official? Helian Shuang’s protest died on his lips.

“If he’s in a rush to see me, let him come here, where we can speak on equal terms,” Xiang Shu said bluntly.

Xie An was just as surprised by this as Helian Shuang. “Martial God? His Majesty has issued an order, so why don’t we—”

He was interrupted by the arrival of two messengers.

“The Four Seas and the prairies are the Great Chanyu’s land, and all people under the sky are the Great Chanyu’s people,” said the first messenger. “We of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant, representing the Great Chanyu, Shi Mokun, have come south to honor our appointment with the world’s greatest warrior, Shulü Kong-daren, at the appointed time.”

Helian Shuang was stunned silent.

The other messenger said, “The Four Seas and the prairies are the Great Chanyu’s land, and all people under the sky are the Great Chanyu’s people. Under the command of the Lord of Buyeo, King Sosurim of the Goguryeo Kingdom, and in accordance with the pact sworn with the Shulü

clan at the foot of Mount Paektu and our historical ties with the Ancient Chi Le Covenant, we have come to honor our rendezvous with the world's greatest warrior, Shulü Kong-daren, at the appointed time."

Chen Xing stared, dumbfounded. Well, that explained the letters that Xiang Shu had dispatched two months ago.

On the third day of the fifth month in the seventh year of the Taiyuan era, Fu Jian arrived as scheduled to honor his appointment for peace talks with the southern Jin diplomatic envoy—but on the day of his arrival in Luoyang, two more significant events unfolded in the Central Plains. Shi Mokun, the Great Chanyu of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant, had led the combined forces of the Sixteen Hu tribes south, twenty thousand people strong. Simultaneously, King Sosurim of Goguryeo, who had landed in Jiaozhou with another twenty thousand soldiers, advanced on Luoyang.

Fu Jian could never have imagined Luoyang becoming isolated from the outside overnight, but that was precisely what had happened. The respective armies of King Sosurim and Shi Mokun had blocked the eastern and northern roads into the city. Meanwhile, Jiangnan's Beifu Army was on a northward march to Chaohu, joining forces with Feng Qianjun's hastily assembled mercenaries. There was only one road out for Fu Jian: the westward road back to Chang'an.

"I believe we have enough forces now," Xiang Shu said to Xie An.

Xie An nodded and wiped some more sweat from his brow. "That… that should indeed be enough."

Chapter 81

XIANG SHU WAS ONLY ONE MAN, but he had become a powerful threat to Fu Jian. An army a hundred thousand strong had surrounded Luoyang, and King Sosurim and the Great Chanyu Shi Mokun had sent messengers to the palace to request to attend the diplomatic talks during the Dragon Boat Festival.

"You…you are…the Great Chanyu?" asked Helian Shuang.

"Not anymore," Xiang Shu replied. "They've come only because of the army of monsters your emperor, Jiantou, has raised. Everyone is already tired of fighting battles while they're alive; imagine how exhausting it must be to keep fighting after you're dead. Go back and tell him not to worry. Ideally he'll set fire to the drought fiend army himself. If he's not willing to do so, then we shall negotiate the conditions of his surrender the day after tomorrow."

Still trying to wrap his mind around it all, Helian Shuang left to do as he was told.

What kind of setup is this? Chen Xing thought. The Qin, Jin, and Xianbei peoples; the Ancient Chi Le Covenant; Goguryeo; Feng Qianjun's mercenaries; the Exorcism Department—that was seven great powers that had come together, converging on this place, in this moment, to attend what would be the largest diplomatic talks the Divine Land had seen in centuries. If they couldn't reach a compromise, they would fight, and the ensuing battle would be cataclysmic.

"Fu Jian wishes me to ask you why you're doing this," Murong Chong said. This time, he was the one Fu Jian had sent to request their presence. Xiang Shu was no longer hiding his identity, so Fu Jian had no reason to continue to treat him as an ordinary diplomatic envoy.

"No reason," Xiang Shu replied mildly. "I felt like it."

Chen Xing gaped at him. "You… But you've made this into such a big deal?"

Xiang Shu ignored him, still speaking to Murong Chong. “Where are King Sosurim and Shi Mokun?”

“They aren’t planning to enter the city. They will meet with us at noon when the talks begin. Fu Jian wants to discuss things in private with you first.”

“There will be no discussion. I have nothing to say to Jiantou. Anything worth discussing was already dredged up two years ago. He chose this path for himself.”

“What about your sister?” Chen Xing asked.

“There’s been no sign of her yet,” Murong Chong replied. He hadn’t found any trace of Wang Ziye, either. Meanwhile, the spies that Feng Qianjun had dispatched were approaching the Longmen Mountains, covertly watching the movements of the troops near the area.

Unable to convince Xiang Shu to go with him, Murong Chong returned alone to report Xiang Shu’s response to Fu Jian. Chen Xing and Xie An began to guess at what Fu Jian was thinking, what plans he had made, and whether he would immediately send people back to Chang’an to bring in reinforcements. Or would he stick to his modus operandi and treat this new development with a cold indifference?

“No messengers left the city in the night,” Feng Qianjun reported.

Xie An didn’t know if he should laugh or cry. “This is unambiguously Qin territory. How has the situation become so advantageous for us?”

“Luoyang has never truly been Fu Jian’s. The greatest power in the city still resides with the people, Han and Xianbei alike. It’s hardly a surprising outcome.”

Fewer than twelve years had passed since Fu Jian used Wang Meng to conquer Luoyang, the eastern capital. Before that, the Xianbei Murong clan had controlled the city, and before that, it was Jin territory. It would never have been possible for Fu Jian to bring the entirety of the Central Plains to heel in twelve brief years. In that light, Fu Jian having brought only twenty thousand imperial guards with him to Luoyang demonstrated extraordinary hubris. He had underestimated his enemies—and fallen prey to Xiang Shu’s ambush from all sides.

After setting the groundwork, Xiang Shu had left a road open for Fu Jian's messengers to travel eastward out of the city. This was a clear signal to Fu Jian: *If you don't want to have a discussion, you can leave. I won't stop you.*

Of course, they had been correct in their prediction that Fu Jian wouldn't run. Doing so would have made him the world's laughingstock. Chen Xing now strongly suspected that Wang Ziye was still at Fu Jian's side, but thankfully, in Fu Jian's eyes, the people of Goguryeo and the Ancient Chi Le Covenant were mere ants to be squashed. What were they against three hundred thousand drought fiends? If push came to shove, Fu Jian could set them loose from Longmen Gorge. Their strength would be more than enough to raze Luoyang to the ground.

Deep in the night on the fourth day of the fifth month, Xie An wrapped up their final preparatory meeting. "That's how tomorrow's diplomatic talks will probably go. Xiaoshidi, you have to stay by the Martial God's side at every moment. Don't take even a single step away from him. Whether we can lure out Wang Ziye and secure our victory is up to the two of you."

"This is a matter that involves the entirety of the Divine Land. It is not a duty that falls to us alone," Xiang Shu said darkly. "Why would they have come otherwise?"

Chen Xing understood that tomorrow's talks were not only life-or-death for them—they would shape the Divine Land's future. He nodded. "Sui Xing will watch over us. I suspect now that its presence in my life has been leading to this moment."

He still had more than a year left. At first, Chen Xing had wondered uneasily if that meant this wouldn't be the final battle. Now, he wondered if this *would* be the last fight and that final year would be a gift from the heavens. That would be a blessing indeed. He suspected that he owed his current state of mind to Xiang Shu's influence—that without his noticing, a seed of hope had been planted in the depths of his heart.

Maybe I'll be able to win against them. Maybe we won't need to take that step.

And maybe nothing will even happen on the day I turn twenty.

Chen Xing rose to his feet silently. He had originally thought to use the Jin people as a way to put more pressure on Fu Jian and create an opportunity to force Wang Ziye to reveal himself. He hadn't expected this many people to come. So many of their forces were about to be swept up in an unexpected power struggle with uncertain results. If they failed, the consequences they would have to shoulder would be much heavier than before.

But Xiang Shu was right: This was a danger that the entire Divine Land faced. It didn't rest solely on their shoulders.

Chen Xing turned back to look at Xiang Shu, and Xiang Shu looked back at him. In the brief moment in which their gazes met, something occurred to Chen Xing.

"I'm going to rest," he said.

As he left, Feng Qianjun raised his bottle of wine. "Want some?" He poured it out into cups, splitting it between himself, Xie An, and Xiang Shu.

Brow furrowed and deep in thought, Xiang Shu looked in the direction Chen Xing had left. Tonight was an important night, and all of the pieces of their plan were in place. If Chen Xing managed to get himself kidnapped again, they would be done for tomorrow.

Xie An noticed Xiang Shu worrying. "It will be all right. Xiao Shan will keep him company."

Feng Qianjun smiled, though his smile carried a tinge of hurt. "You know, Xiang Shu, of all the people in this world, I admire you the most."

Xiang Shu picked up his wine cup, took a sip, and put it down again, saying nothing.

"You've summoned the people of Goguryeo and the Hu people of Chi Le Chuan, and spent your family's entire fortune, all to save the life of one person."

Xie An smiled but didn't say anything. He began to tidy up the materials and maps on the table. Xiang Shu, as usual, didn't speak.

After a while, Xie An asked, "What young person hasn't wished for something similar?"

Feng Qianjun picked up his own cup of wine, got to his feet, and left.

“Xie An, do you think we can succeed tomorrow?” Xiang Shu asked suddenly.

“It’s hard to say,” Xie An said. “I put our odds of winning at about sixty percent, since Wang Ziye is both our final target and the greatest unknown variable. But we’ve already done all we can. Isn’t that enough?”

The summer night was cool, and Chen Xing was sitting in a chair outside in the courtyard. Xiao Shan lay next to him, already asleep. Chen Xing looked at the Milky Way twinkling on the summer horizon. *If Sui Xing really leaves one day,* he wondered, *would it return to the sky? Will it turn into one of those stars?*

He knew what that look of Xiang Shu’s had meant, before he left. *Everything that I’ve done is for your sake, so that you can keep living well.*

“Since the day I was born,” Chen Xing murmured, “I’ve never felt the same way I do now, filled with this intense yearning to keep living. But I still lied to him, Xiao Shan. I haven’t told him that in the end, I’ll still have to leave.”

He shut his eyes. There were many things he hadn’t thought through clearly, including the voice that had spoken to him in his dreams, and his twentieth year. Technically, if Sui Xing were to leave in a year and a few months’ time—if it would still be with him until his birthday—that meant he would definitely survive until then.

Which meant that if he chose to do battle right now, then, no matter what, he would be able to survive.

Did Xiang Shu have some information that Chen Xing didn’t? Chen Xing began to feel a little suspicious, but the gentle gusts of balmy summer breeze soon lulled him to sleep.

When he woke the next morning, he was lying on his bed. Someone had carried him inside.

The diplomats in the inn had woken some time ago, and they were in the process of washing up. Xie An was carrying on as normal, walking

around and checking on his subordinates.

“Xie-shixiong, you have some skill,” said Chen Xing. “You’re not even nervous.”

Xie An pulled Chen Xing aside. “To tell you the truth, Xiaoshidi, I’m so nervous right now it’s giving me cramps,” he whispered. Chen Xing sighed.

Feng Qianjun, who was already dressed, made his way over to them swiftly. “We’ve found Wang Ziye!”

Everyone perked up at that, and they went inside the hall to hear the news. Feng Qianjun spread open the map and traced out a path.

“There was a Han man who drove a horse-drawn carriage through the Longmen Gorge,” he explained. “He arrived in the western part of Luoyang. He showed a handwritten order from Fu Jian and entered the palace. There might have been other people in the carriage.”

“It must be him,” Chen Xing said. “How big was the carriage?”

Feng Qianjun described its exterior—it sounded like a normal carriage.

“We’ll proceed according to the plan,” Xie An said, “and when the time comes, we’ll deal with whatever he throws at us. Everyone, prepare to depart.”

After they finished breakfast, Chen Xing changed into the uniform of the Exorcism Department. When he found Xiang Shu, he saw that Xiang Shu had donned his Hu attire, an indigo Sixteen Hu-style brocade robe embroidered with totems. He was carrying the Acala Blade on his back as he stood in the courtyard, staring off into space.

“Where did you find this outfit?” Chen Xing asked, unable to repress a smile. It was reminiscent of his old Great Chanyu outfit, though it was missing the rings that symbolized Alliance, Fiefdom, Military Might, and the Shepherd and Mountain Gods. He also no longer wore a carved jade tooth at his waist to distinguish him from the others.

“Shi Mokun sent someone over with it last night,” he said.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I’m thinking that everything is going according to your wishes,” Xiang Shu said. “Now I can finally make that request of mine.”

“What’s your request?” Chen Xing asked. A summer breeze blew through the courtyard, rustling the leaves on the trees. Those leaves’ shadows danced over them like a million tiny meteorites.

Xiang Shu thought for a moment. “After today, if we’re able to successfully eliminate Wang Ziye and you’re still alive, then you must leave with me.”

“But what about Chiyou?”

When Xiang Shu saw the earnest look on his face, a vein popped out of his forehead again. “You’re just…just taking advantage of the fact that I…”

“What am I taking advantage of?” Chen Xing asked, confused.

Xiang Shu forced back his rage. It would not be good for him to beat up one of his own allies before the diplomatic talks even began. “We’ll deal with him in the end.”

Chen Xing’s heart thumped once. “In the end?”

“There will always be a way. Didn’t you want to travel across… across the entire Divine Land? Can’t you set your goals aside temporarily once we’ve gotten rid of Wang Ziye?”

Another smile overtook Chen Xing’s face. He looked away, toward the mottled shadows of the trees in the courtyard. “Aren’t we…already doing that?”

Xiang Shu froze.

“Honestly, every day that I spend with you, I’m happy. And we’ve been to so many places together.”

Xiang Shu fell silent. And just then, a Tiele messenger arrived, bearing a small golden dragon.

“This is from the Great Chanyu Shi Mokun,” the messenger said. “He requests that Shulü Kong-daren please wear it on his person.”

Chen Xing recognized it as the Tiele people's totem: It meant that though Xiang Shu had abdicated the title of Great Chanyu, he was still the pride of the Tiele people. So Chen Xing took it from the messenger and helped Xiang Shu fasten it.

"Let's go," Chen Xing said. He reached out and took Xiang Shu's hand, and they left the inn.

The plains by the Yi River, north of the city of Luoyang, were the location chosen for the diplomatic talks. Because Fu Jian was, in name, the owner of this territory, they had built a huge open-air hut on the plains, where three kinds of animals would be sacrificed to the heavens; this was required by the traditional laws of the land outside the pass and the kingdom of Western Liang. The hut was decorated with golden rugs and equipped with golden plates and jade cups.

In a gesture remiss for a host, Fu Jian wasn't already at the hut waiting for the helpers Xiang Shu had invited over. In fact, the sun rose to the height of three bamboo poles before Fu Jian set out on a horse-drawn carriage, bringing Murong Chong with him. He had tried multiple times to arrange a meeting with Xiang Shu and been rebuffed. Now, the Heavenly Emperor understood: The Great Chanyu was serious this time.

After Shulü Wen's death, Fu Jian had thought that the Shulü family, the inheritors of the role of Great Chanyu in Chi Le Chuan, would be like brothers to the royal Fu clan—loyal no matter what. He couldn't fathom why Shulü Kong would oppose him so absolutely now. The Han people had proposed these diplomatic talks, but mere Han people would not spur Fu Jian to action. They were meat on the chopping block. He could have Jiankang destroyed in the time it took to flick his finger. What cared Fu Jian, with his millions of soldiers, about a nobody like Sima Yao?

Fu Jian sat in the carriage, holding Murong Chong's hand. "Before We came to Luoyang, We spent every day wondering how exactly We had offended Shulü Kong."

Murong Chong didn't pull his hand back. He simply studied the carriage's curtains, silent.

“Why would he go help the Han? We know that he’s half Han, but he’s really a Tiele…”

“Because he cares for that Han boy,” Murong Chong said mildly. “Chen Xing.”

Fu Jian smiled. “The one Yan-er is fond of? The brat’s not as simple as he looks, then, if a war is about to erupt just because of him… Hmm, speaking of which… The very idea may seem absurd, but if it were you instead of Xiang Shu, We would also… So it’s not as if We don’t understand.”

Murong Chong didn’t say anything more. Obviously, he understood Fu Jian’s meaning, and he turned to frown at him, his eyes betraying some complicated emotion. Fu Jian scooted closer. He rubbed the bridge of his nose against the side of Murong Chong’s face, then pressed their foreheads together. And then he turned away again and said no more.

When the Jin diplomats arrived, the open-air hut was already full of people. Only the main seat remained empty. The moment Chen Xing and Xie An entered, everyone rose to their feet, nodding to them in greeting.

Xie An knew that this courtesy was for Xiang Shu, and he turned to the side, joining all the other gathered people in honoring Xiang Shu’s entrance. Shi Mokun was the first to salute Xiang Shu, followed by the Goguryeo king and his scholars. In accordance with the customs of the ancient alliance, Xiang Shu returned the salute. Then everyone settled wordlessly back into their seats.

Shi Mokun then greeted Chen Xing, whom he had met years prior in Chi Le Chuan. Chen Xing greeted him with a smile, then looked over at the Goguryeo side. Their leader was a lithe, slender-fingered young man with single eyelids. He was about the same age as Tuoba Yan and wore a king’s armor; this had to be King Sosurim.

King Sosurim noticed Chen Xing watching him, so he said, “It has been a year since we last met. Do you remember me?”

Chen Xing blinked in surprise. The Goguryeo king was very fluent in the Han language. Then again, Confucian culture had been highly respected in all corners of the Divine Land ever since the start of the Han dynasty, and

Goguryeo had opened an imperial academy to educate more scholars. They probably held Han people in high esteem. He smiled. “Have we met before?”

“Back when you left Pyongyang, His Majesty was the person who led the rear guard,” one of the scholars explained helpfully. Chen Xing hadn’t realized that.

“Please don’t summon another bolt from the blue today,” King Sosurim said. “Everyone wants to return home alive.”

Everyone chuckled at that, and Xie An looked at Chen Xing in surprise. “Shidi, you know how to call down lightning?”

“It was just good luck,” Chen Xing said. He had no idea what to do with himself. “Quick, change the subject.”

The banquet hall was silent for a moment, and Chen Xing glanced at the sky above to figure out what time it was. Fu Jian was already late, and showed no sign of appearing. If he was merely putting on airs, then that would be all right. What he feared was that Fu Jian had made some arrangements in secret. The open-air hut was surrounded by guards. If the fight started here, it would be chaos.

But Xiang Shu and Xie An had planned for everything. He had to trust in their skills.

King Sosurim broke the silence. “Shulü Kong, why did you give up the position of Great Chanyu? You’re already the world’s greatest warrior. Was that not enough for you, so you went to the Han to learn how to call down lightning?”

This guy sure talks a lot, Chen Xing thought. *If you weren’t a king, Xiang Shu would be chewing you out right now.*

But Xiang Shu didn’t spare him even a little face. “Go Gubu, you’re spewing a lot of nonsense. You want to fight?”

The whole hut burst into laughter.

“Do you remember when Gubu was in Chi Le Chuan and you two got into an argument about how to shoot?” Shi Mokun chuckled. “After you’re done here, you can have yourselves a proper competition.”

“We didn’t determine who won back then,” said King Sosurim. “I brawled Shulü Kong one-on-one, but we didn’t have a clear victor. Now we’ll have to compare our marksmanship.”

Xie An chuckled. “I’ve heard a great deal about the King of Goguryeo’s legendary archery skills. I’m a great admirer.”

King Sosurim cupped his hands in a salute. “And I greatly admire the many schools of thought developed by you Han people. My dearest wish is to travel to Jiankang and learn from you all.”

“Then on my emperor’s behalf, though I lack the authority, I must humbly invite you to visit someday.”

“And I must thank the Great Jin for allowing our young people to study in Jiangnan. You see, though we here today come from many different places, we communicate through the Han language. That is evidence of the splendor of the Han people.”

Xie An smiled. “There is much that we should learn from Goguryeo as well. We must never grow comfortable with standing still and making no progress.”

Hearing that, Xiang Shu gave Shi Mokun a meaningful look: *See what he’s doing?* Shi Mokun thought for a moment, then nodded.

King Sosurim modestly demurred and Xie An opened his mouth to speak again…only for Shi Mokun to interrupt them.

“When I received the message from the previous Great Chanyu, Shulü-daren, we marched here in double time, traveling day and night without rest. Though it remains to be seen how much we can involve ourselves in this conflict between you southerners and Fu Jian, some things cannot be tolerated with the current political atmosphere as it is.”

Xie An hurried to thank him. Chen Xing guessed that Xiang Shu’s letter to Shi Mokun had included an explanation of the danger facing the Central Plains. The people of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant trusted Xiang Shu greatly; they believed his words, and they came not to interfere in Xiang Shu’s personal matters, but to confront a clear and present danger to the entire Divine Land.

“There are things a ruler can do, and there are things they cannot do,” King Sosurim said. “When two countries engage in battle, they must determine a victory on equal grounds. That was my thought when I heard the Great Chanyu Shi Mokun describe the catastrophes that befell Chi Le Chuan.”

Finally, a clear cry rang out from outside the tent: “The Master of Dilong,[6] the true Dragon Emperor, the joint master of the north, the Heavenly Emperor of the Divine Land, the greatest living warrior within the pass, His Majesty, Fu Jian, has arrived!”

Chen Xing didn’t want to mock Fu Jian, but he couldn’t resist a sly jab. “If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought at least five people had arrived at once.”

Everyone in the hut laughed uproariously. Xiang Shu managed to keep a straight face for quite some time, but in the end, he started laughing as well. When Fu Jian strode into the hut, trailed by Murong Chong and Helian Shuang, what greeted him was a wave of bright laughter.

Fu Jian frowned.

No one got up; they all merely saluted him. Fu Jian had expected a respectful, solemn scene, not a group of people who had been discussing something hilarious. He also didn’t know how to interject. All he could say was, “We have come late.”

Chapter 82

CHEN XING WAS STILL PONDERING who should speak first when Fu Jian entered. Everyone looked at Xiang Shu, but he remained silent and did not bow. Unexpectedly, it was Xie An who decided to break the silence, smiling. “You’re just in time, Your Majesty. We’ve all had time to catch up.”

Fu Jian did not recognize Xie An. “The Han people have old times to catch up on with the Ancient Chi Le Covenant?” he said indifferently. “We were not aware that your peoples were so familiar with one another.”

“All are brothers within the Four Seas,” Xie An said pleasantly. “We are like old friends at first sight. I have long known of Your Majesty’s illustrious reputation. To meet you today is an honor, and I must take this opportunity to convey the respects of my emperor.”

“Mm.” Fu Jian glanced around the hut. “We accept his courtesy.”

“This visit is also thanks to Your Majesty’s courtesy. We are grateful for your willingness to travel to Luoyang in an effort to resolve the disputes between our two nations.”

Fu Jian had intended to seize control of the situation upon his arrival, but Xie An refused to give him that chance; he made himself the focal point of the room. Though Murong Chong was allied with the Jin envoys, he had not informed Fu Jian of Xie An’s identity. At first, Fu Jian had thought this Han envoy an ordinary diplomat and Shulü Kong his only real concern. Now, he sensed that this man was not so simple.

It was like two armies facing off. The middle-aged man before him had only a few people at his back, but he had the presence of a general who commanded a thousand troops. In this modest hut, he conversed with ease and stood as if he were Fu Jian’s equal.

Fu Jian’s gaze swept across the room and settled on Chen Xing. “Resolve the disputes between our two nations?” he said unhappily. “Is that your solution? We thought you were here for war.”

Xiang Shu made as if to speak, but Xie An beat him to it. “If negotiations fail, then war is inevitable. Everyone is here with the goal of preventing war. I’ve heard that Your Majesty enjoys reading Han texts—surely you’re familiar with the saying ‘courtesy before force.’”

A dark look came over Fu Jian. No one in the world dared to speak to him like this, not since he defeated the Xianbei Murong clan. That a Han, of all people, had the audacity to do so left him momentarily speechless.

Watching Fu Jian, Chen Xing noticed a trace of black aura between his brows, just like Tuoba Yan… Actually, had Tuoba Yan arrived? And where was Yuwen Xin? Was he outside leading the imperial guard?

Xiang Shu, sitting in cross-legged silence, chose that moment to put his hand on the back of Chen Xing’s hand, glance at him, and give him a slight nod. Chen Xing understood—everything was already in place, and Xiang Shu was telling him not to worry.

“Let’s address the most important matter first,” Xie An said calmly. “From what we’ve learned, Your Majesty has employed the sorcerer Wang Ziye’s dark arts in Chang’an, Luoyang, and even Xiangyang, preventing the departed from resting in peace and using them to form an army. It seems this force is intended for an invasion of Jin territory. May I ask if this is true?”

Chen Xing was ready. He had even brought Sima Wei along. The carriage holding him was right outside, ready to be summoned the moment Fu Jian denied the accusation. Shi Mokun had witnessed the drought fiend army firsthand, though King Sosurim was not as well-informed.

But to everyone’s surprise, Fu Jian did not deny it. “The departed? That is an exaggeration,” he said. “This is an army of the undying. The only question is, are any of you willing to join us and become an immortal?”

Chen Xing was struck dumb. A gust of wind swept through, lifting the curtains of drifting gauze into the air.

From the plains outside the hut, a person could see Yique in the Longmen Mountains. While their allies conversed with Fu Jian in the hut, Xiao Shan, Feng Qianjun, and Feng Qianjun’s subordinates were steadily approaching Yique. Tens of thousands of Goguryeo’s highly trained

Shadow Blades intermingled with southern tribal warriors, each carrying a jar of highly flammable oil. They scaled the cliffs from all directions using grappling hooks, awaiting Feng Qianjun's signal arrow. Yet the closer they drew to the drought fiend camp, the heavier the resentment in the air became. It was so dense that Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun's divine weapons were beginning to react to it, humming and trembling uncontrollably.

When they reached the cliff's heights, they were greeted by the low voice of a woman. "You've finally come."

Feng Qianjun stilled. Princess Qinghe, dressed in white gauze, stood atop the southern peaks of Longmen. Her flowing robes billowed wildly in the summer gale.

"Shi Hai-daren said you would come sooner or later," she said.

"Who is she?" Xiao Shan asked.

"An old acquaintance," replied Feng Qianjun. He sheathed his blade and stood silently at the cliff's summit, facing Princess Qinghe…who Xiao Shan had noticed looked a little like Gu Qing.

"Go to your spot," Feng Qianjun told him. "I can handle this. I've already come to terms with it."

Xiao Shan nodded, not protesting. "Be careful." With that, he latched onto the rocks with his grappling hook and leaped.

He swung across a distance of several dozen feet, his slender figure flying over the peaks toward the Eastern Gate of the Longmen Mountains. When he reached the highest point, he removed the longbow from his back and looked down at the Yi River plains below. In front of him, to the south, there was the vast expanse of land, where he could see the open-air hut. Over on the riverbanks stood a solemn, imposing army. In the distance, Murong Chong's Pingyang Silver Cavalry were swiftly approaching the plains, heading toward their final appointment with Murong Chong.

Behind him loomed the encampment of three hundred thousand drought fiends, shrouded in resentment.

Xiao Shan looked at the Western Gate a hundred steps away and saw Feng Qianjun there, standing tall. The wind had picked up, and Feng Qianjun retrieved his longbow from his back and nocked an arrow, waiting

for the signal from the hut on the plains that they'd captured Fu Jian. When he saw it, he would fire an arrow into the sky.

Suddenly, there came a putrid scent from the trees at the mountain's peak. Xiao Shan looked around. There was rustling in the bushes, and then the head of a giant beast emerged. It was a wolf, and it was dead.

The wolf slowly approached Xiao Shan. It was more than ten feet tall, with gray-blue fur and murky eyes that were fixed on Xiao Shan. Xiao Shan couldn't help but take a wary step back. He was already small, and the beast's size made him seem even smaller.

"Recognize him?" a voice said mockingly. "This is Huyan Hangula. I put in a great deal of effort to find him. What should you call him? I suppose the word 'father' would not be wholly inaccurate, no?"

A Han man appeared behind the giant wolf, his entire body radiating a black aura. Though his appearance had changed, he spoke in Wang Ziye's voice.

The rotting wolf lowered its head. It opened its mouth slightly to reveal sharp fangs, and Xiao Shan gasped and retreated to the edge of the cliff.

Wang Ziye was holding a fan and smiling gently. "It seems you still sense it. It's a pity there was a small mishap along the way, but fortunately, I made it in time for the plan to work. You two can take your time catching up. I have many other matters to attend to, so I shall take my leave."

Flicking open his fan, he transformed into a flaming black meteor that shot toward the hut on the plains below, where the negotiations were taking place.

It was deathly silent inside the hut. Fu Jian was sitting in the central seat, his face dark and grim. All factions understood that the great war was inevitable now, and all gazes were fixed on Fu Jian.

Finally, Shi Mokun spoke. "The Ancient Chi Le Covenant officially demands that you disband your drought fiend army, destroy this force that is an affront to heaven and in defiance of its laws, and accept our supervision while we watch you burn it down."

“And if We don’t?” Fu Jian asked coldly.

“Then you will be the enemy of the world!” said King Sosurim.

At last, Xiang Shu broke his silence. “Then this place will become your burial ground today.”

Fu Jian erupted in wild laughter, a sound that rang with madness. He was no longer the same man Chen Xing had once met.

“So you’ve come here to judge me, all for the sake of these Han people?!” Fu Jian said. “At last, the truth is out. Let me ask you all, since it seems you’ve never considered it: What gives you the right to judge an emperor?!”

As he spoke, he rose slowly to his feet, exuding immense pressure on everyone around him. The others’ hands went to their weapons. They were ready to act the moment Xiang Shu gave the order. Behind Fu Jian, Murong Chong put his hand on the hilt of his sword too, and he nodded at Xie An, his eyes showing an unyielding determination.

“Your Majesty Fu Jian, what are you afraid of?” Xie An asked. He stood up calmly, and the oppressive atmosphere in the hut vanished without a trace. Fu Jian’s imperial aura dissipated. Just like that, Xie An had shifted the balance of power; he positioned himself again as Fu Jian’s rival, both in visible authority and unspoken pressure.

The leaders of the northern and southern factions had reached a stalemate. For a moment, Fu Jian didn’t know what to do.

Xie An gave him a slight smile. “Are you afraid that your rabble will fall to pieces before they even fight at the Fei River, and you’ll be overthrown by a coup? Or is it that you fear the lowly Han will send you back home with your tail between your legs?”

“Preposterous,” Fu Jian roared—or rather, he intended to, but the word stuck in his throat. In the same moment, Chen Xing felt something strange: An invisible force was drawing from the earth veins. In the northern lands, it coalesced into an intangible dragon and surged toward them, twisting the fabric of space itself around it. The same was happening from the south, but that dragon energy flowed in the opposite direction and gathered around Xie An.

The two powerful forces collided, but the moment they touched, they vanished into nothingness. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu were the only ones who felt the near-imperceptible impact in the foundation of the Divine Land.

“What was that?” Xiang Shu asked, frowning, but Chen Xing shook his head. He couldn’t explain it himself.

“Return in defeat?” Fu Jian snarled with rage, then suddenly laughed. “That depends on your capability, doesn’t it? The world has been in turmoil for a long time. The Han have struggled to survive at the southern edge, and your fated end is near. Only those who unify the world are remembered for eternity—this has been the way since ancient times—and to unify the world, some sacrifices must be made. But what’s there to fear? If the great Ying Zheng’s iron cavalry hadn’t crushed the six states,[7] you Han could never have enjoyed nearly a thousand years of glory and prosperity. The separation of north and south has gone on for too long—the heavens won’t tolerate it any longer. We, and only We, possess the Mandate of Heaven.”

“Are you truly willing to go as far as these methods, though, Your Majesty?” Xie An asked, his tone polite.

“It seems you are firmly opposed to the immortal army,” said Fu Jian.

Xiang Shu was still silently observing Fu Jian. Noticing Murong Chong’s hand trembling on the hilt of his sword, he subtly signaled Murong Chong to hold off and wait for his command.

Suddenly, Fu Jian changed the subject. “I want to introduce two people to you. Have a seat. Both of you, please, come in.”

Xie An frowned slightly. Fu Jian turned around and took his seat. For just an instant, it seemed the storm was about to erupt, but then the atmosphere grew calmer again. Moments later, two Han figures entered.

Wang Ziye gazed around the room and chuckled. “With the exception of King Sosurim, everyone here is an old friend. No need for pleasantries. I would, however, like to introduce a man of great renown—”

“Wang Meng?!” said Murong Chong, his voice trembling and his face pale.

The other man was a scholar, tall and solemn, with a pallid face and cloudy eyes. He cupped his hands and greeted everyone.

Chen Xing's jaw hung open. Wang Ziye had taken a new body, and the sight of the person with him struck Chen Xing like a thunderclap to the head. Fury surged within him—it was Wang Meng! His eldest shixiong!

Murong Chong was equally furious, but for different reasons. Every night that Murong Chong had spent imprisoned in Chang'an, he'd gritted his teeth in hatred of this Han man, who had brought down the Xianbei's Great Yan. Wang Meng was despised by countless people among the Five Hu.

"Our life's greatest regret is that Jinglüe departed before Us and thus left the great plan to pacify the world unfinished," Fu Jian said. "Now Wang Ziye has found a way for Us to achieve immortality and bring back those We have lost. We ask you, all of you…" He looked around the hut. "What in this world could be more satisfying than regaining what has been lost?"

For a moment, none of them knew what to say.

"Our grandfather, grandmother, father, mother," Fu Jian murmured, his eyes half closed, "loved ones, dear friends who have left…" He opened his eyes and looked at King Sosurim, then let his pitying gaze sweep across Xiang Shu, Chen Xing, Xie An, Shi Mokun, and others. "Your fathers, mothers, brothers, children… All that was lost will return. We, all of us, will live forever and regain what we've always longed for. It will be true immortality, eternal and unchanging."

Wang Ziye looked at Chen Xing, his lips curling into a victorious smile, clearly certain this would be enough to break him…but Chen Xing was staring blankly at Wang Meng. Wang Meng had passed away seven years ago and was buried in Chang'an—yet he too had been resurrected!

"Everyone seems to think that resurrecting the dead defies the laws of nature," said Wang Ziye. "In your eyes, the drought fiend warriors are inhuman and know only slaughter. I've invited Wang-daren here today so that you can all see for yourselves how little he has changed since his death."

Wang Meng smiled at them all. Even Xie An was so shaken he didn't know what to say. If the Wang Meng before them was truly the same person

he had once been, their strategies for resisting Fu Jian in the south needed to be completely reworked. Wang Meng's intelligence was not to be underestimated—he'd even defeated Huan Wen!

"Xie Anshi," Wang Meng said slowly, "I didn't expect you to come here personally for the talks. It's been a long time."

Xie An looked back at him silently. Fu Jian paused and blinked at hearing Wang Meng expose Xie An's true identity, and then his expression shifted to one of understanding.

"You've aged," Wang Meng sighed. "Anshi, you're not the way you used to be."

Xie An's expression grew grim. "Wang Jinglüe, why are you doing this? No, never mind—you're not him," he murmured. When he was young, he had met Wang Meng. Later, they served different masters—one the Great Jin and the other the Great Qin. Though they were in opposing camps, they knew each other's styles well. "I remember when you were still alive. You advised Fu Jian to never attack the south. You're not the person I once knew."

Wang Meng raised his eyebrows. "That was then and this is now. The opportunity has presented itself, so why not take it?" He turned his head and looked at Chen Xing. "Xiaoshidi, if I remember correctly, you, who are bound by Sui Xing—"

"So that's how it is," Chen Xing said quietly. "Too much talk leads to mistakes. I think you can shut up now."

Xiang Shu frowned, and Wang Meng froze.

"You've finally revealed your true colors." Chen Xing looked in surprise at Wang Meng, then cast a glance at Wang Ziye behind him. In fact, from the moment Wang Meng appeared, Chen Xing had been thinking about how to break Wang Ziye's tactic of resurrecting the dead. To destroy the alliance between Fu Jian and Wang Ziye, he would have to strike at its core. What was the core? Naturally, it was these people.

It might not be the most honorable move, Chen Xing thought, *but sorry, it's time to start spreading rumors.*

Xiang Shu turned to look at Chen Xing.

“So, this is what you call immortality,” Chen Xing said seriously. “Digging up other people’s ancestors’ graves?”

Eyebrows went up around the room, and heads swiveled to look at him.

“And then taking the deceased from their graves to use as your puppets? These people are no longer themselves! They’re just you, Wang Ziye, performing your play in different bodies.”

Wang Ziye watched Chen Xing carefully. This was an unjust accusation, but there was no time for Wang Ziye to explain himself to the crowd. Moreover, he had to be cautious—Chen Xing might have been doing this to fish for information.

Chen Xing sighed. “Looks like you have to possess a lot of people, and make it so lifelike too. Shi Hai-daren, you’ve certainly put in a lot of effort. Let me ask you, though: Didn’t it feel awkward pretending to be Princess Qinghe with Fu Jian?”

Fu Jian reared back, and Wang Ziye erupted in anger. “Lies! Can’t you all see? Do you think His Majesty is blind? If Qinghe was truly me in disguise, would His Majesty not recognize it? Wang Meng, tell them—”

“No need to say more!” Chen Xing said. “Shifu never mentioned a word about my identity to my eldest shixiong, let alone anything about Sui Xing. That isn’t my shixiong!”

“Shidi, you…” Wang Meng faltered. Chen Xing was Wang Meng’s shidi; of those in the hut, he was uniquely suited to speak up and deny Wang Meng’s identity. *So,* Chen Xing had figured, *it doesn’t matter if you’re my shixiong or not; I’ll say you’re not anyway. Who’s going to prove otherwise?*

This unexpected gambit left Wang Ziye wrong-footed. He whipped around to address Fu Jian. “Your Majesty! This brat is lying! I’ve done no such thing!”

But the crowd had felt a chill run down their spines at Chen Xing’s words. Did the people Wang Ziye resurrected truly lack their own consciousness, as Chen Xing said? Zhou Zhen, Princess Qinghe, and even Wen Che… Were they all mere puppets, acting on Wang Ziye’s will?

Wang Ziye snapped. “When Princess Qinghe was still alive,” he sneered, “she drank the Demon God’s Blood I gave her, which allowed her to retain her consciousness. Exorcist, you still know so little about this matter. You’re still so naive.”

“What?” Chen Xing narrowed his eyes. *There it is*. “She drank what?”

Too late, Wang Ziye closed his mouth. He cursed himself inwardly for speaking carelessly and revealing the truth. A deadly silence fell over the hut.

Chen Xing needed to say no more. Fu Jian had understood everything. His expression clouded over with rage at being deceived. “Wang Ziye!” he spat. “You’ve been plotting this for three years?!”

Wang Ziye let out a strange laugh. Chen Xing had exposed him, so there was no point in hiding the truth any longer. His face darkened. “You’ve all come prepared, so why don’t we find out today if Sui Xing’s protection extends to your companions?”

Chen Xing’s expression transformed in an instant. Xiang Shu, on the other hand, was unbothered. He crushed the wine glass in his hand.

“Don’t listen to his nonsense!” he cried. “Attack!”

Chapter 83

IN THE HEIGHTS of the Longmen Mountains, Feng Qianjun took a deep breath and confronted Princess Qinghe.

"You are not her," he stated plainly. "I know you aren't. Who are you really?"

Princess Qinghe closed her eyes. "I possess all of the memories from when she was alive. Tell me, who does that make me? Hmm, Qianjun?"

"You're keeping the dead from their eternal slumber!" Feng Qianjun bellowed. "You're…you're heartless! Get out of her body, now!"

He pulled his gleaming twin saber from its sheath with both hands and lunged at her. Princess Qinghe dodged with a leap into the air. "Qianjun, really," she murmured. "Don't you want your gege to be alive? Why are you always so stubborn? I know you've been regretting it all…"

Feng Qianjun roared, and the Harmony Saber sucked in resentment from the drought fiend camp in the gorge. In an instant the plants around them shriveled and withered. With a loud rumble, giant vines rose from the hill into the air to curl around Princess Qinghe and drag her back down to the ground.

Xiao Shan was forced to bend over backward when the rotten wolf opened its jaws. The garbled sound that issued from its throat made him feel like all the organs in his body were being turned inside out. He cried out in pain—it was like a giant hook had latched onto his soul and tried to yank it out of his body.

He clutched the wolf's claws, his hands trembling ceaselessly. There was no escape.

Then, suddenly, something bloomed from within his chest—it was a little bit of the Heart Lamp's light. Though it was weak, it helped block the gray wolf's soul-stealing ability and brought Xiao Shan's soul right back to

where it belonged. In the next instant, Xiao Shan heard something: the whistle of a signal arrow from the distant hut, soaring across the vast plains.

Gasping for breath, Xiao Shan drew his bow and nocked an arrow, but the gray wolf pounced at him with an indignant roar. It bit down on his shoulder, sending them both tumbling off the cliff. The force of the pounce tilted him backward, but Xiao Shan maintained a firm grip on his bow and arrow. Airborne, he loosed the arrow toward the horizon.

The second signal arrow shrieked through the air.

Black brambles growing from the saber in Feng Qianjun's hands dragged Princess Qinghe back to the mountain's summit. Hearing the sounds of the two signal arrows, Princess Qinghe let out a biting laugh. Black resentment exploded from her body—and was sucked directly toward Feng Qianjun's Harmony Saber.

"Come…don't struggle anymore…" Princess Qinghe shook off the vines and made for Feng Qianjun, opening her arms wide.

Feng Qianjun discarded his saber and switched to his bow. He nocked an arrow, shouting, "Rest in peace!"

But then, in Princess Qinghe's eyes, he saw a trace of sorrow. He gritted his teeth against the swell of tears in his own eyes and cried out in anguish. Without conscious intent, he shifted his aim, and loosed the signal arrow to pierce through Princess Qinghe's midriff with an ear-piercing shriek. The arrow shot clear through her body and kept flying at a slant as black blood spurted from the exit wound.

"You… You had so many chances…" Princess Qinghe lunged at Feng Qianjun, dragging him down the steep precipice. He struggled to push her aside, but she captured his mouth in a kiss.

Just above the Longmen Gorge, the waiting soldiers heard the whistle of the third signal arrow. It was noon, but dark clouds were rolling through the sky above. With a massive, earthshaking bang, they threw hundreds of thousands of cans of flaming oil into the drought fiend camp—and the entire gorge went up in flames.

Fire illuminated the majestic peaks of Yique, which had stood tall since the separation of heaven and earth. The flames spread rapidly, forming what looked like a thirty-foot-long fire dragon that began to snake across the earth.

"Attack!" shouted Xiang Shu, and he, King Sosurim, and Shi Mokun all loosed their arrows at once. All three arrows flew straight at Fu Jian, but Wang Ziye waved the folding fan in his hand, making resentment rise in the tent and surge skyward. Moments later, a signal arrow pierced the sky, followed by a second, then a third—and a great fire erupted in the Longmen Mountains.

Chen Xing's cry rang out amid an earthshaking gust of dark wind. Light erupted, illuminating the world around them. Like a wave colliding with another, it dispersed the dark wind Wang Ziye had summoned.

Chen Xing deactivated the Heart Lamp and turned to face Wang Ziye from afar. "Seems like your plan wasn't as perfect as you thought. Shall we see which is stronger—your dusty, millennia-old wisdom, or the luck that Sui Xing has given me?"

Wang Ziye let out a cold chuckle.

"Catch Fu Jian!" shouted Xiang Shu.

The troops all around them had received their orders before this all began. When they heard those three signals and saw Longmen Gorge begin to burn, Murong Chong's Silver Cavalry swept into the plains like a tidal wave, with the Chi Le Chuan cavalry and Goguryeo's riders hot on their heels.

Murong Chong unsheathed his longsword amid the surging black qi and charged in with a loud battle cry. Suddenly, fresh blood splattered in all directions—Fu Jian had caught Murong Chong's blow with his bare hand.

"We taught you everything you know about martial arts," Fu Jian growled. "Do you really think that We wouldn't know of your petty schemes?!"

For a split second, Murong Chong was stunned. Fu Jian seized the opportunity to punch him in the chest, sending him flying backward. He

landed heavily and spat out a mouthful of blood.

Wang Ziye landed at Fu Jian's side. "We must depart now, Your Majesty," he said, sounding unconcerned by the chaos around them.

"You!" Fu Jian rounded on Wang Ziye, glaring fiercely. "Explain this to Us!"

Wang Ziye raised a hand. Resentment exploded outward to ensnare Fu Jian. "Now that you've drunk the blood of the Demon God, it's no longer up to you."

Fu Jian's eyes turned bloodred. Murong Chong's betrayal had already filled him with rage, and this made him lose all reason.

"Yuwen Xin! Assemble the imperial guard at the foot of Yique!" Wang Ziye cried. But Fu Jian's guards had fallen into disarray—they seemed embroiled in infighting. Wang Ziye suddenly remembered someone he had overlooked. "Damn it. Tuoba Yan…"

From the mountain peak, Feng Qianjun plummeted headfirst into the water. Princess Qinghe had disappeared to who knew where. In the distance, the earthshaking thunder of thousands of warhorses' hooves pounded against the ground, echoing like war drums. The Goguryeo, Chi Le Covenant, and Pingyang cavalries converged from three different directions and closed in around Fu Jian's imperial guard.

The imperial guard, supposedly united under Yuwen Xin's command, had split into two factions, and nearly ten thousand of them now followed Tuoba Yan. Luoyang troops were waiting outside, but in all the chaos, they had no way to break through. On the plains, the four armies, including Tuoba Yan's, launched a fierce assault on Yuwen Xin and his guards, and Yuwen Xin's forces dropped like flies. They beat a retreat toward the foot of the Longmen Mountains, but in their haste, they trampled the Luoyang troops.

"He's escaping!" Chen Xing shouted.

"No rush," Xiang Shu assured him. "We'll capture him. Get on the horse."

They each mounted a horse, and Xiang Shu pressed his fingers to his lips and whistled. Another whistle responded, then another, over and over in perfect coordination, spreading across the ranks and signaling the four armies to form up.

Xiang Shu drew the heavy sword strapped to his back and raised it high. “Heart Lamp.”

Chen Xing ignited the Heart Lamp on the overcast plains, beneath the looming dark clouds. In Xiang Shu’s hand, the Acala Blade shone bright in response.

“All troops of the mortal realm, all troops of the Divine Land, heed my command!” Xiang Shu cried in a ringing voice. “This battle against evil is of gravest importance—life and death, rise and fall, all hang in the balance! Fear no death! Follow me! Charge!”

An ocean of roars swelled from the throats of all four armies, and fifty thousand soldiers converged under Xiang Shu’s command and charged the remainder of Fu Jian’s imperial guards. In the mad rush of thousands of galloping horses, it was all Chen Xing could do to follow Xiang Shu as they sped across the plains. One lone thought occupied his mind as he trained his eyes on Xiang Shu’s back:

Though Xiang Shu was no longer master of the land beyond the Great Wall, though he held no claim to any subject or territory, he was, after all, still worthy of being the king of the northern lands.

Thank you, Heart Lamp, for finding him for me.

Wang Ziye and Fu Jian had hastily retreated to the foot of the Longmen Mountains. There they met Yuwen Xin and his subordinates, who had done the same, tossing away their armor in their haste.

“Retreat!” shouted Yuwen Xin. “State Teacher! Retreat! Shulü Kong has launched a counterattack!”

Wang Ziye’s voice was bitingly cold. “Get out of the way, you worthless trash!”

“Tuoba Yan’s betrayed us too!” Yuwen Xin continued. “There’s nowhere left to run!”

With the Longmen Mountains ablaze at their backs, the imperial guards could retreat no further. Any closer and they would be burned to ashes. The raging fire blazed so high it seemed to reach the heavens, and it plunged everything it didn't touch into darkness. Still, Xiang Shu and his large army continued their relentless charge, forcing Fu Jian and his guards even further toward the blaze. Some guards broke rank and leaped into the river in a bid to escape with their lives.

Wang Meng had also managed to escape, and now he returned to Wang Ziye's side. Seeing the swelling numbers of enemy forces on the plains and the relentless advance of Xiang Shu's army, Wang Ziye raised his hand and shot a ray of resentment skyward.

BOOM! The burning trees on the mountain above collapsed, trampled by drought fiends as they surged out of the gorge. The drought fiends, engulfed in flames, poured down the mountain and swept across the plains.

Meanwhile, at the foot of Yique, Feng Qianjun had finally found Xiao Shan. Xiao Shan was struggling out of the water, resentment bleeding from the bite wounds the wolf had left in his shoulder.

"Are you okay?!" Feng Qianjun asked anxiously.

Xiao Shan managed to nod. He pointed toward the distance. "I…I saw…"

"Run first, talk later! The mountain's burning!"

Flames surrounded them on all sides. Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan clambered onto the bank of the Yi River and looked up to see burning drought fiends running amok. The fire had incinerated two thirds of the three hundred thousand drought fiends, and the remaining hundred thousand swarmed in from all directions. Dragging their broken limbs behind them, their flesh roasting in the flames, they struggled to combat Xiang Shu's iron cavalry. After clashing for just a few rounds, they were trampled under their hooves.

King Sosurim felt something akin to horror as he looked on. It finally sank in that if not for this battle, his own country would have been facing danger like this not long after Fu Jian accomplished his goal of conquering the south.

“I’ll leave it to you now!” Xiang Shu shouted to Shi Mokun. “We’re going to capture Wang Ziye!”

“Where are Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun?!” Chen Xing asked from behind him.

“We can’t wait for them any longer!”

The plan so far was, narrowly, a success: Wang Ziye’s drought fiends had almost all been dealt with, and all that was left was the most crucial part. Chen Xing looked anxiously into the distance and saw Wang Meng back up a little, standing a thousand feet away from Yique. As Chen Xing watched, Wang Meng raised his hand and unfolded a tattered pennant. The resentment coiled around it surged.

The moment Chen Xing saw the pennant, he realized something crucial: The enemy still had a usable artifact up their sleeve. “Retreat!” he cried immediately. “Don’t ask why! Quick!”

Xiang Shu galloped away at full speed, sweeping the Acala Blade across to one side as a signal. The four armies promptly wheeled around, changed formations, and retreated in all directions. Then Wang Ziye waved the pennant, and—*BOOM!*—a formless wave of air swept across the battlefield.

Xie An, following them, recognized it too. “The White Tiger Banner?! That’s an artifact!”

The White Tiger Banner was one of the two artifacts held by the imperial Fu family. Legend had it that it was a treasure from the Han dynasty and that it symbolized the emperor’s right to wage war and to end it. It was said that all the world’s armies were compelled to fight when they saw the White Tiger Banner and to cease fighting when they saw the Zouyu Banner. Centuries prior, the two pennants contained powerful mana within them; after the Silence of All Magic, unknowing mortals came to see them as simple symbols of imperial authority. Chen Xing had once seen them in Fu Jian’s study, but he hadn’t expected Wang Ziye to bring out the White Tiger Banner in battle.

“Wang Ziye!” Xie An bellowed. “You’re using an ancient artifact of the Jin people! Have you no shame?!”

If the White Tiger Banner had gotten hold of them, Xiang Shu's troops would have turned on each other, but thankfully, Xiang Shu's speedy order to retreat meant that they had all escaped the artifact's mile-wide area of effect. Some of Fu Jian's remaining troops were less lucky; under the pennant's influence, they found themselves in the throes of bloodlust. They broke formation, scattering and indiscriminately slaughtering anyone who crossed their paths.

"Who doesn't have access to a magical artifact now and then?" Chen Xing jeered.

In the next instant, the Zheng Drum sounded. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* The fallen drought fiends' trampled bones rose from the ground and charged toward the imperial guards in a surprise attack.

It was hell on earth. Flames had already engulfed mountains and forests and scorched the earth for miles on all sides. Now, untold numbers of skeletons rose from the burnt ground, closing in for an ambush.

"Don't use that! Save it for a more important battle!" Xiang Shu yelled angrily. "Everyone, get back! Stay away from Wang Ziye!"

"Find a way to reclaim that magical artifact," Chen Xing gasped, trying to catch his breath.

Xiang Shu frowned in deep frustration. "There's no time. Where the hell did Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun go?"

Feng Qianjun dragged Xiao Shan out of the water. They crawled dripping wet to the riverside, where they shot the fourth signal arrow into the sky, mobilizing the soldiers lying in ambush at long last.

The sixty thousand reinforcements Feng Qianjun had recruited with silver and gold charged from their hiding places on either side of Yique to launch the final assault against Fu Jian's army. Fu Jian himself was on the front lines, striking people down left and right, but his army was in shambles. The White Tiger Banner had invigorated his troops to fight fiercely, fearless of death, but it had also turned them wild; they were no longer listening to their emperor's commands.

When he saw the new troops surging onto the battlefield, Wang Ziye took an automatic half step back. “Draw them over to us. Do not let His Majesty engage them!”

Suddenly, Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun rushed out of the water and straight toward them.

“I’ll kill you!” yelled Xiao Shan as he pounced at Wang Ziye, gripped by a rage the likes of which he’d never felt before.

Feng Qianjun swung his saber at Wang Meng, cleanly slicing off the hand that gripped the White Tiger Banner. Wang Ziye pulled back and ran, abandoning Wang Meng without a second look.

Stopping his horse outside the encirclement, Xiang Shu saw the imperial army led by Yuwen Xin break apart once again. Panting, Tuoba Yan led his troops over to meet up with them. “What do we do now?! Continue fighting?!”

“Wait…I saw Feng Qianjun!” said Xiang Shu.

Feng Qianjun grabbed two horses, one for himself and one for Xiao Shan, and rushed back to the formation, holding up the White Tiger Banner. “I’ve got it back! How do we use it?”

Chen Xing was quick to stop him. “Don’t! Don’t use it for any reason! Do not!”

“Gather the whole army!” Xiang Shu shouted decisively. “Charge!”

No longer able to ward off the opposition, Fu Jian fled, following Wang Ziye to safety deeper inside Yique. Tracing the path of the river, they passed through the burning entrance of the Longmen Gorge—and then Wang Ziye turned around and took to the air. He soared back toward the center of Yique, gazing down at the carnage below. The assaulting forces charged in again and again, leaving fewer and fewer of Fu Jian’s imperial guards alive.

Shi Mokun and King Sosurim split up to create two wings, each going around one side of the Longmen Mountains to outflank the enemy. Xiang Shu held his heavy sword aloft and charged deeper into Yique, Chen Xing at his side.

“Well, I suppose it’s time to see whether it truly can be opened,” murmured Wang Ziye.

Down below, Chen Xing yelled out, “Take his fan! That thing must have great significance for him!”

“Why don’t you do it?!” Xiang Shu shot back, irate. “Don’t just order me around! He’s in the air right now—how am I supposed to get the fan?!”

As they argued, Wang Ziye gathered up all the nearby resentment and then waved his folding fan in the air. The resentment took the form of a mountain-sized black meteor that roared toward the ground. This guy seriously intended to wipe out everyone below with a meteor impact!

“Too late!” Chen Xing shouted.

There was nothing for it. Xiang Shu hastily readied the Acala Blade, and then bright light burst from his body—and the Immovable Wisdom King, Acalanatha, descended.

Moving as one, every single person on the battlefield raised their head and stared. They saw Xiang Shu leap up from his galloping warhorse; they saw a gold-plated white robe materialize over his body as he twisted in midair, and the Acala Blade in his hand transforming into six different weapons. He launched himself into the sky and directly at Wang Ziye, leaving trails of golden flame behind him.

Pain exploded in Chen Xing’s heart. *I can hold on*, he told himself. *I have to hold on…*

Then, suddenly, Wang Ziye closed his folding fan, and the black meteor vanished. Xiang Shu was taken aback, and he was still moving at full speed when he passed through the dense resentment left behind in the meteor’s wake. All nine characters on the Acala Blade flared up in unison, and Yique seemed to react to it: The two cliffs making up the gate’s western and eastern “towers” lit up simultaneously, producing between them a brilliant ring of light. A strange, dragon-shaped golden symbol flashed between the two mountains, and then a dazzling golden veil of light appeared. It was as if a magical gate had been opened in the center of Yique.

“What is that?!” said Chen Xing, flabbergasted. But there was another problem: Wang Ziye had withdrawn into the gate of light, and with

no way to slow his momentum, Xiang Shu soared through it right after him.

“Chen Xing!” yelled Feng Qianjun. “We must have fallen into his trap!”

Chen Xing’s sight began to darken. The moment Xiang Shu passed through that veil, they’d lost their connection through the Heart Lamp. The next instant, the veil began to rapidly dim; then it flashed once and disappeared completely.

But then Xiang Shu and Wang Ziye reappeared, as if they had simply passed through to the other side of a wall. Without the power of Chen Xing's Heart Lamp, the Martial God's golden robe vanished from Xiang Shu's body, and the Acala Blade fell from the sky, ordinary iron once more. Wang Ziye fell too, hitting the ground with a loud bang, his body wrapped in black qi.

Xiang Shu, though, flipped over in the air and landed on his feet. He and Wang Ziye had reached the other side of Yique. Chen Xing galloped over to them, shouting, "Xiang Shu! Are you okay?!"

Xiang Shu straightened up. Facing away from Chen Xing, he raised his hand, showing that he had Wang Ziye's folding fan.

"Great!" Chen Xing yelled.

There was no trace of Fu Jian or Wang Meng. Wang Ziye, the last remaining member of their trio, crawled out of the river with great difficulty and let out a sudden, strange laugh. "I knew it," he said darkly. "You're even more foolish than I thought, Shulü Kong! You will regret this!"

Chen Xing dismounted. "Knew what?" he asked Xiang Shu anxiously. "What happened just now?"

But when their gazes met, Xiang Shu averted his eyes, looking distracted. He replied in a voice only Chen Xing could hear. "Nothing. I'll explain when…when we return."

Something must have happened in that brief moment they passed through the veil of light, but Xiang Shu was right—this wasn't the time to discuss it. Feng Qianjun, Xiao Shan, and Xie An were already galloping toward Wang Ziye, surrounding him from all directions.

"This husk also won't do after all," Wang Ziye said. "Xiang Shu, consider my words carefully."

A foreboding chill ran down Chen Xing's spine. He frowned. "What did he say?"

But Xiang Shu just picked up the Acala Blade and pointed it at Wang Ziye. "I won't consider the words of a dead man. Do it!"

He, Feng Qianjun, and Xiao Shan all leaped at Wang Ziye at once—but Wang Ziye kept laughing that strange laugh. "I won't entertain you any

longer!”

This was the moment Chen Xing had been waiting for. “There’s still…some good stuff…waiting for you!” he shouted, and he spread his hands to activate the Yin Yang Mirror.

The artifact flew into the air to hover over their heads. Wang Ziye’s laughter came to a sudden stop. With a rumble, a vortex burst out of the Yin Yang Mirror and sucked Wang Ziye in.

“You…” Wang Ziye began, but the rest of his words were lost as he vanished into the vortex.

“It’s up to you now, Xie-shixiong!” Chen Xing shouted. “Protect the mirror!” Then he entered the Yin Yang Mirror along with Xiang Shu, Feng Qianjun, and Xiao Shan, and Xie An rushed forward to catch the mirror as it fell.

Chapter 84

THEY WERE BACK IN THE CHANG'AN of the mirror world. The last great battle here had reduced it to rubble; houses were caved in and the palace had gone up in flames. It was a city of ruins, and Chen Xing, holding this realm's version of the mirror, had the only way out.

In front of the palace, Xiang Shu, Feng Qianjun, and Xiao Shan started to move in the other three directions. Xiang Shu stepped in front of Chen Xing, shielding him, and addressed Wang Ziye. "When we defeat you here, your soul will have nowhere to escape to."

It occurred to Wang Ziye then: These exorcists intended to get rid of him right here, right now. "I have dreamed of death for a long, long time," he told them blithely. "How unfortunate that the heavens don't heed human wishes. If you kill me today, you will have done me a service."

"That door in Yique," said Chen Xing. "What exactly is behind it?"

Wang Ziye smiled. "You will learn the answer to that one day. And I admit, I didn't expect you to accomplish so many things with just the light of that little lamp in your heart. Look at us now—you've forced me into a dead end. It was clever of you all to find such a use for the Yin Yang Mirror I snatched from Zhang Liu."

Chen Xing was starting to realize there was something off about Xiang Shu. "Xiang Shu…"

Xiang Shu shook his head and flicked the Acala Blade into a battle stance, his eyes fixed intently on Wang Ziye.

They had Wang Ziye's fan and the drought fiend army was gone. Outside the mirror realm, their allies had Yique surrounded and would very soon capture Fu Jian and Yuwen Xin. There was nowhere for Wang Ziye to run.

"Wang Ziye," Chen Xing said. "Let go of the last of your resentment and allow your soul to return to the divine vein. We're here today because heaven itself wishes to send you off. This is the true will of heaven."

“It’s not over yet,” Wang Ziye murmured. “Far from it. I want to see how long you can last, burning your own soul away like this. I do not think I will be the first to falter. And I’m curious—what’s happening outside right now?”

With that, he rose back up into the air, and resentment exploded out of him. It swept over the city like a windstorm, whipping up fallen planks, broken tiles, and bricks, and became a mighty torrent that swept down upon their heads.

The resentment Wang Ziye wielded was more powerful than anything Chen Xing had imagined. The windstorm only grew in intensity, an apocalypse come to the mirror realm’s Chang’an. Xiang Shu shouted, “Keep that lamp safe!”

Chen Xing cupped his hands to his chest to create a shelter and ignited the Heart Lamp within it. In the dark, wild storm of resentment, the Heart Lamp was a single spot of unceasing light. However great the waves of resentment became, the light didn’t so much as flicker.

In unison, Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan pulled out their weapons and charged.

Xiang Shu lifted the Acala Blade and drew light from the Heart Lamp, but only enough for the sword to shine with a faint glow—he didn’t dare draw too much from Chen Xing’s energy. As soon as Wang Ziye landed, he would rush forward and strike with his sword. “For Qing-er’s sake,” Feng Qianjun yelled as he brought his blades down, “I’m going to make sure you—”

“First is the physical body!” he called out to him.

In the next instant, Feng Qianjun skewered Wang Ziye’s physical body on his blades, leaving him a mess of flesh and blood. His blackened soul congealed into a physical mass that emitted an earsplitting noise.

“Now what?” Wang Ziye taunted them. “What else can any of you do to me?”

“Back away!” shouted Chen Xing.

Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan did so immediately, and Xiang Shu retreated behind Chen Xing. Chen Xing pushed the Heart Lamp forward

with both of his hands and it exploded outward, a swirling beam of light aimed directly at Wang Ziye.

Wang Ziye was floating in the air, laughing a fierce, eerie laugh. He harnessed the resentment into a dark fire that burned in his hands, then blasted it back toward Chen Xing. His pillar of resentment met Chen Xing's pillar of light, and the menacing resentment pushed back the light of the Heart Lamp until the place the two forces met was forced closer to Chen Xing.

A smile came over Wang Ziye's face. "The power of a not yet twenty-year-old exorcist's soul against my three thousand years of cultivation…"

Xiang Shu wrapped his arms around Chen Xing's shoulders from behind. He cupped his large hands around Chen Xing's, making the yin-yang seal, and they cast the spell together. With the Heart Lamp emitting from four hands instead of two, its glow intensified until it shone in front of Chen Xing for thousands of miles.

In that instant, it felt to Chen Xing like the world itself was aglow, engulfed by an ancient golden flame. In some way beyond his understanding, he sensed himself and Xiang Shu becoming connected. Their souls became two interlocking rings of light, revolving as they resonated.

The renewed light blocked the advancing resentment. It was equal in power to Wang Ziye's black fire, pushing it back until the two beams came to a stalemate in midair.

"You—Shulü Kong?!" Wang Ziye exclaimed.

Xiang Shu said nothing, merely opened his eyes and lifted his gaze toward Wang Ziye. His eyebrows, his hair—his entire body—was wrapped in a glimmering golden flame. Chen Xing, still in Xiang Shu's arms, slowly grew brighter until he was only a glowing silhouette.

"Attack," Xiang Shu said, voice deep and resonant. "Protect that point of light in your heart."

Wang Ziye realized too late that he was in trouble. Before he could react, Feng Qianjun flipped the blade in his hand, concentrating hard, and

Xiao Shan raised one claw. Together, Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun began to draw the resentment toward themselves.

Wang Ziye let out a furious roar as the resentment cloaking him was pulled away in an endless stream into the Saber of Harmony and Life and the Sky-Rending Claws. As his resentment weakened, the Heart Lamp overtook it, pushing further and further toward him.

"You… You!" Wang Ziye howled, struggling to hold off the Heart Lamp's light. Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan were both grimacing in agony, their entire bodies wrapped in black fire. Summoning all his remaining strength, Wang Ziye pulled out a talisman wreathed in black flames. "Save me… Fu Jian…save me!"

In the other world, on the plains along Yique's northern riverbank.

Fu Jian's rage was at its zenith as Tuoba Yan led the rest of the imperial guard toward the riverbank in hot pursuit of him. Aware that this was a delicate situation, all of the others involved backed up to nearly a mile away out of respect for Xiang Shu's orders to let the Qin people deal with their own internal affairs. As Tuoba Yan caught up to Fu Jian, he coughed a few times, bringing up a bit of blood.

Yuwen Xin's face was covered with blood; he looked wretched beyond belief. At his side, Fu Jian gripped his sword tightly as he turned to face Tuoba Yan.

Murong Chong was rushing toward them too, but while his forces had successfully broken through the outer battle formation, he couldn't make it through the inner one. There'd been a point in all the chaos where he might have been able to kill Fu Jian, but Xiang Shu had anticipated he'd try that, and had arranged for Tuoba Yan's faction of the imperial guard to reach Fu Jian first. With them in the way, Murong Chong couldn't strike the killing blow.

"Yan-er, did you come here to kill me or save me?" Fu Jian asked darkly. "Have you betrayed me too?"

"I have never forgotten Your Majesty's kindness," Tuoba Yan panted, "and the imperial guard would never betray Your Majesty! What we have done today, we've done solely to protect the Great Qin! The evil Wang Ziye

has brought disaster upon the Great Qin and bewitched Your Majesty. Imperial guard, heed my orders! Protect His Majesty at all costs!”

“Fools!” Fu Jian thundered. “Do you have any idea what you’ve ruined?!”

Behind Fu Jian and Yuwen Xin were the last of the loyal imperial guards, numbering fewer than a hundred. Before them were the ten thousand guards led by Tuoba Yan. Now, Xie An stepped out of their ranks.

“Your Majesty, you should come with us,” he said. “We swear on the reputation of our Martial God, Shulü Kong, that you will be treated with the respect you deserve. Once Wang Ziye has been dealt with, we will release you.”

Yuwen Xin knew now that there was no way for Fu Jian to escape this elaborate, comprehensive trap; if they were defeated and taken prisoner, Fu Jian would become the ruler of a fallen country, his lifetime of glory washed away in a matter of moments. Should they cast down their arms and surrender?

But as Yuwen Xin wavered, Tuoba Yan spoke up.

“Men of the imperial guard,” he said gravely to those survivors who still stood behind Fu Jian, “will you continue to cruelly slaughter each other?!”

The surviving guards had been unhappy with Yuwen Xin to begin with, and now that they’d witnessed Wang Ziye’s evil magic and the battle with the drought fiends, they understood that Wang Ziye was the one who had destroyed Chang’an. Slowly, the thought of desertion took root in each of their hearts, and they backed up, wanting to return to Tuoba Yan’s side.

Finally, Tuoba Yan bowed to Fu Jian. “Your Majesty, please come with us.”

But Fu Jian’s answer was a defiant bark of laughter. “You really think that We have no way to deal with you all?” he asked savagely. Suddenly, a hideous gust of resentment billowed out from the copse of trees behind him, and out leaped the rotting carcass of an enormous wolf. “Kill these traitors!” Fu Jian roared as he jumped onto the wolf’s back.

But the wolf didn’t listen to Fu Jian’s orders. Its eyes locked onto Xie An, and Xie An had a sudden horrible realization: Its goal was to seize the Yin Yang Mirror. The decaying wolf moved lightning fast. Before he could dodge, it was in front of him.

“Be careful!” Murong Chong shouted from behind Xie An. He raced forward and used his metal armor to block the enormous wolf’s sharp teeth from clamping down on Xie An, who took the opportunity to duck and sprint away.

Tuoba Yan’s expression changed. “Protect His Majesty!” he shouted. “And protect that Han!”

Thanks to Murong Chong, of all people, Xie An had narrowly missed having his head bitten off. The assist came as a surprise to both of them. The imperial guards who rushed forward to help had been bowled over by the wolf, and now, as they got back to their feet, they found that there wasn’t enough room to fire arrows in this narrow space.

“Don’t worry about him!” ordered Murong Chong. “Ensure His Majesty’s safety first!”

“Don’t do that!” Xie An shouted back. “I still have the Yin Yang Mirror on me!”

Tuoba Yan rallied his guards to run after the wolf, but it was too fast; just when they thought they were about to catch up, the wolf left them in the dust. In this life-or-death moment, Xie An called upon some hidden strength that he hadn’t known he had to duck and dodge, desperately avoiding the wolf’s teeth, until at last Murong Chong and Tuoba Yan managed to flank Fu Jian and the wolf and drove them away from Xie An.

Seeing that he would be caught if he didn’t run now, Fu Jian roared, “Go!”

Xie An was secure for the moment inside a circle of imperial guards, still reeling from everything that had happened—but then Tuoba Yan saw the huge wolf rear up. Realizing that the situation was about to take a turn for the worse, he and Murong Chong jumped onto the guards’ shields and leaped toward Xie An. Just as they predicted, the wolf jumped, crossing hundreds of feet in a single bound and soaring over the guards’ heads. It opened its mouth, but just before it could snatch Xie An away in its jaws,

Murong Chong threw his longsword. It pierced Fu Jian's shoulder and knocked him off the wolf's back.

Tuoba Yan rushed in from the side, holding his long halberd point-down, and slammed the flat side of it into the wolf's head. He stabbed the point into its neck, and in retaliation, the wolf bit down hard on his left arm, tearing half of it off. But Tuoba Yan didn't let out so much as a shout; in fact, he didn't seem to feel any pain. He lifted his right fist and, with shocking strength, slammed it into the wolf's head.

The blow left the wolf rolling around on the ground, but it swiftly rose again and abandoned Fu Jian, crashing through the guards' ranks as it fled.

"Protect Xie An-daren!" cried Tuoba Yan, his hand clasped to the stump of his arm. "We have to be careful! It might return!"

Xie An knew that having the Yin Yang Mirror made him the enemy's main target. "I need to find a place to hide…"

Tuoba Yan quickly approached Fu Jian. "Your Majesty." The armor at Fu Jian's shoulder had been pierced through, and he sat up with great difficulty. The wound was covered with black blood.

"Chong-er…" Fu Jian breathed. "Yan-er…"

"Your Majesty!" Tuoba Yan said anxiously, moving to help Fu Jian. Then, suddenly, he stopped.

The shining blade of the emperor's sword had pierced clean through Tuoba Yan's chest and out his back. Tuoba Yan's entire body slumped onto Fu Jian, and he stared at Fu Jian mutely. His mouth filled with blood; he could no longer speak. The sword had struck right through his heart. Slowly, the last glimmer of light in his eyes dimmed and vanished, disappearing into nothingness as his pupils grew lax.

A bright red film covered Fu Jian's eyes. Clutching his sword tightly, he asked, "Who else wants to let Us test Our sword on their body?"

The imperial guards slowly backed away.

"Fu Jian, do you know what you're doing?" asked Xie An.

"How could We just let the children We raised betray Us?" Fu Jian growled. "We gave them the lives they lead, so naturally, We should be the

one to take those lives away."

Resentment was pouring off Fu Jian, and the imperial guards created a wide berth around him. At his feet knelt Tuoba Yan, whose heart he had pierced with his sword. Murong Chong approached slowly, stopping ten paces away and staring fixedly at Tuoba Yan. Then he raised his gaze to Fu Jian. He couldn't believe that Tuoba Yan had met such an end.

"No one in all the Great Qin," Murong Chong said, "was more loyal to you than Tuoba Yan. You've gone mad, Your Majesty."

Pulling his sword out of Tuoba Yan's body, Fu Jian turned and walked toward Murong Chong.

"Capture him," Murong Chong ordered. "Make His Majesty come back to his senses!"

The imperial guard rushed forward with a tremendous shout. Fu Jian swept his imperial sword in an arc and resentment suffused the air, but the troops kept coming. It took waves upon waves of soldiers before they managed to subdue him; countless ropes and steel nets flew over him, pinning him to the ground.

"In this realm," Fu Jian bellowed, "We are…the one true ruler!"

In the mirror world, in the ruins of Chang'an.

Fu Jian's thundering roar echoed across the horizon, and Chen Xing's eyes widened, but Xiang Shu didn't give him time to think it over. "Now!" he shouted, activating the Heart Lamp.

Chen Xing responded instantly, igniting his soul and pushing its power to its limit. Wang Ziye let out a howl of despair. His last reinforcements had failed to appear, and he'd burned through all his resentment; now, his glowing-red soul hung in the air for all to see.

With a sharp shriek, Wang Ziye turned and tried to flee, but he quickly realized there was nowhere to escape to: The only exit, the Yin side of the mirror, was with Chen Xing. "This cannot be my end!" he screeched. He bent down and charged, forming a pair of claws from his soul to slash at Chen Xing.

But Chen Xing lifted a hand, revealing something glimmering in his palm. It was the Soulfall Bell.

Wang Ziye's bloodred eyes widened as he realized what was about to happen. Chen Xing channeled all his mana into the Soulfall Bell. The bronze of the bell turned bright gold, and it began to diffuse light in all directions.

Chen Xing flicked his wrist. *Clang!*

Wang Ziye surged upward in a desperate attempt to escape, but his soul was dragged back by the power of the Soulfall Bell. It unspooled into ribbons of light tethered to the bell.

"This isn't what I wanted!" Wang Ziye's voice howled.

Chen Xing's mana was almost all gone. It was taking all his effort to control the Soulfall Bell as he and Wang Ziye struggled against one another.

"Hold on!" Xiang Shu yelled.

"The power of his soul is…too strong… Wang Ziye!" Chen Xing roared. "It's over!"

The Soulfall Bell's power began to warp and deform Wang Ziye, who was at this point nothing but pure soul. His three immortal souls and seven mortal forms flowed like water into the Soulfall Bell, which rang with another earthshaking clang… But suddenly, where Wang Ziye's chest would have been, a gemlike drop of dark red blood flashed into existence.

Between one breath and the next, Chen Xing's vision went black, and he saw Huanmo Palace again. Ahead of him, that huge heart was glowing brightly. The light seeped into the earth veins, instantly turning them a bloody, corrupted red.

"Mortal," said a resonant voice in Chen Xing's ear, "I am impressed that you have managed to reach this point."

The drop of blood shattered and diffused through Wang Ziye's soul as it was sucked into the Soulfall Bell, buying him one last moment.

"Yet here I am," Chen Xing replied, raising his eyebrows. "You won't be able to save your subordinate, Chiyou."

The Soulfall Bell drained away Wang Ziye's earth soul, and Chen Xing flicked his wrist again. *Clang!*

With the second chime, Wang Ziye's wandering soul left his body; with only two remaining souls, he had no more strength with which to struggle. He fell limp. He could not stop the power of the Soulfall Bell and the Heart Lamp.

But then a speck of red light began to glow inside Feng Qianjun's body. Another appeared dimly in Xiao Shan's chest, flickering in and out.

Chiyou's voice rang out. "You've spoken too soon. Let us see if it's your Heart Lamp that illuminates the world, or if it will be my devil blood that ensnares these humans' hearts…"

The second of Wang Ziye's three immortal souls had yet to fully detach. Xiang Shu moved quickly, picking Chen Xing up in his embrace and then turning, flipping, and leaping down the stairs. But he wasn't quick enough. Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan, still enveloped in resentment, charged in from both sides. The Saber of Harmony and Life and the Sky-Rending Claws both slashed at once, obliterating Taichu Palace in one fell swoop.

The palace fell to pieces with a boom like an avalanche. Wang Ziye, still wailing, crawled along the ground, a mere shadow of his former self. Xiang Shu clambered out of the ruins with Chen Xing in his arms. Chen Xing had been interrupted in the middle of casting his magic, and now he leaned heavily against the side of a pillar, unable to catch his breath.

"Just a little more…" he panted. "Just…"

But Feng Qianjun was already charging at Xiang Shu, his eyes glowing bloodred. He slashed his blades down at Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu lifted the Acala Blade horizontally and, with an angry roar, blocked Feng Qianjun's attack.

"To activate these artifacts," Chiyou's voice said, "you used resentment as a replacement for the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth."

Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan leaped forward as one, their bodies wrapped in resentment. They turned into swift shadows and attacked Xiang Shu wildly, ferocious as a storm. Xiang Shu had to protect Chen Xing

behind him while fending off his fellow exorcists who had been taken over by the Demon God's Blood, and for a while, he was laboring strenuously.

"But what you failed to understand was that those who attempt to control the powers of darkness will always be consumed by it eventually. We told you long ago that a day would come when all those who trusted you would betray you…"

Chen Xing pushed himself off the ground with laborious effort, his mouth filled with blood. He lifted a hand, his palm glowing with one last ray of light, and pushed it in Xiao Shan's direction. "Ex…expel."

With a wild roar, Xiao Shan swung the Sky-Rending Claws. Feng Qianjun had been keeping Xiang Shu occupied, but when Xiang Shu saw Xiao Shan moving to strike, he turned and leaped toward Chen Xing. He tried to grab Chen Xing and pull him into his arms, but it was too late; Xiao Shan was about to land his killing blow.

"Die," said Chiyou's voice. "The era of the exorcists has ended."

But, suddenly, a youthful voice cut in. "It's not time yet. Apologies, Deity of War."

Xiao Shan's claw strike reached Chen Xing's chest—but it didn't split him in two. Instead, there was a light *ding!* as the claw was deflected by the artifact Chen Xing had tucked in his robe at his chest.

The blow tore Chen Xing's outer robe, and it gaped open to reveal the newly cracked Yin Yang Mirror. With a series of audible snaps, the cracks spread, and then the mirror's face shattered.

The other world, on the plains of Yique.

Everyone gathered together, eyeing Fu Jian, who had been tied down securely in their midst. Several soldiers held rags in their hands, but none were bold enough to try stuffing them into Fu Jian's mouth.

"Well…" An assistant general looked around, but he couldn't find a single person who was willing to gag the emperor. Murong Chong was a subordinate and Shi Mokun was on the same level as him; King Sosurim was from a neighboring country, but he wasn't actually Fu Jian's enemy.

The only person with the power to stuff a rag into Fu Jian's mouth was Xiang Shu, who wasn't here.

"I'll do it," Xie An offered. "In our Great Jin, I, Xie Anshi, do all the things other people do not want to do." He didn't care one whit if the man was the heavenly king; he stuffed the rag right into Fu Jian's mouth.

On the Yi River's floodplain, the three hundred thousand drought fiends had been eliminated and the danger had finally passed. Now they were just waiting for news of how the group inside the mirror, Chen Xing and the rest, had fared.

"Now what?" asked Murong Chong. "Are you taking him away?" The original plan had been to hand Fu Jian over to Tuoba Yan, who would bring him to Shouxian or Luoyang and put him under house arrest. But now Tuoba Yan was dead.

"Let's stick to the plan," Xie An said. "How's that? It wouldn't be appropriate for us to arrest him, so someone from your country will have to go along with him."

"Xie-daren," Murong Chong murmured suddenly, and from his tone, Xie An knew that something was wrong.

He lowered his head to look at his own chest and pulled out the Yin Yang Mirror. Cracks were propagating rapidly across its surface. Everyone backed up, and Xie An grew nervous. It seemed dangerous to hold the broken mirror in his hand, but putting it on the ground wouldn't do either.

"Do you want to find a place to hide?" said Murong Chong.

As the mirror cracked, the images inside began to fragment too—and then, with a bang, the entire surface shattered. Xie An cried out, and Shi Mokun yelled, "Be careful! Step back!"

The resentment that had been sucked away from Wang Ziye suddenly exploded outward from the mirror's shattered face. Xie An made a split-second decision and turned the face of the mirror toward the sky. In doing so, he saved all of their lives; with the Yin Yang Mirror broken, resentment spewed forth in a storm of black fire.

The first actual form to come out of the mirror was a streak of bloodred soul. It was followed by the shadowy forms of Feng Qianjun and

Xiao Shan, and then Xiang Shu stumbled out, still holding Chen Xing. More resentment exploded out in their wake, flattening the plains for nearly a mile around, and as the black fog dissipated, they heard Chiyou's hideous laughter from within. When Feng Qianjun landed, he picked up Fu Jian, and then he and Xiao Shan turned into black flames and shot toward the horizon.

Xiang Shu stood in the middle of the plains hugging Chen Xing's unconscious body. The slowly dissipating resentment crept over the ground, leaving black earth and withered plants in its wake.

"Martial God?" asked Xie An.

Xiang Shu took in his surroundings. He was covered in blood. Then he looked back down at Chen Xing in his arms, and for a moment, he just breathed.

"Fuck," he said.

Chapter 85

UNDERGROUND, IN HUANMO PALACE, Wang Ziye's soul crawled laboriously across the ground toward the massive heart. "My lord," it wailed. "My lord…"

Numerous figures stood behind Wang Ziye: Princess Qinghe, Feng Qianjun, Xiao Shan, and Sima Wei; the dismembered Wang Meng; a towering warrior wearing a pre-Qin helmet; and a gigantic, decaying wolf. Wang Ziye's seven mortal forms and two remaining immortal souls struggled across the ground and crawled up the altar to reach out toward the heart.

"You worthless…fool." Chiyou's voice echoed throughout the chamber. "You fancied yourself incapable of miscalculation, but look at you now."

A drop of blood dripped from the Demon God heart and fell onto Wang Ziye's soul. Wang Ziye let out an eerie howl, and then his soul rippled and slowly reformed into a blurry human figure.

"I need…more…resentment," Wang Ziye muttered. "Power I accumulated over a thousand years…burned away by the Heart Lamp, just like that…"

"Delusional!" Chiyou thundered. Wang Ziye shuddered, his spectral form falling to its knees, and Chiyou's voice grew icy. "You've found the array?"

"Yes. I found the remnants of the ancient Tidal Array in the Longmen Mountains."

"Then set it up. Use the spiritual energy of the Dinghai Pearl to activate the seven artifacts, then rebuild my physical form the day Fu Jian goes to war."

Wang Ziye hesitated. "But the Dinghai Pearl—"

"It will come," said Chiyou.

"The various artifacts—"

“They will come as well. The ghost king has stabilized, and there are enough here to serve as the seven guardians of the array. Go. Make the arrangements.”

Wang Ziye turned to look at the towering figure of the ghost king.

“With my power,” Chiyou said, “I can still hold it in check for a few more months. Send him to Karakorum. Now.”

“Yes,” Wang Ziye replied. “But I still require a body.”

“Find one yourself.”

Wang Ziye turned to look at his subordinates. Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan’s eyes were glassy, and a faint red glow pulsed from their chests.

Chiyou’s voice grew quieter. “To save Chen Xing’s life, he will come. But until that happens, my power must not be wasted any further.”

Wang Ziye hurriedly nodded.

In the seventh year of the Taiyuan era, on the fifteenth day of the eighth month.

“How long did I sleep this time?” Chen Xing muttered to himself, his head throbbing as he sat up. That he was still alive after that battle with Wang Ziye was nothing short of a miracle. “Where’s Xiang Shu? Xiang Shu! Where are you?”

Xiang Shu was not by the bedside. Chen Xing looked down and saw that he was dressed in a simple robe, much like every other time he had woken up from unconsciousness. He got off the bed and pushed open the door to find that night had fallen. The evening breeze carried a hint of autumn’s chill, cool and refreshing. A full moon hung in the sky, so bright it hardly seemed like night at all.

In the distance, he heard the sound of laughter and conversation. He followed the voices through the corridor and into the garden, where he found Xie An hosting a gathering. Xie Xuan, Wang Xizhi, and several other esteemed guests were seated with him, drinking, enjoying mooncakes, and admiring the luminous night. Xie Daoyun sat to one side, looking troubled.

Chen Xing hesitated, struggling to grasp the situation. “Everyone…”

Xie Daoyun looked up abruptly. “He’s awake!”

“He’s awake!” Xie An echoed, immediately striding forward to support him. “He’s *awake*!”

The whole gathering erupted into commotion as the guests all stood to greet him. “What kind of banquet is this?” Chen Xing asked, still a bit dazed. “Wait, let me change first…”

As he spoke, a wave of dizziness hit him. “You should rest more,” Xie Daoyun urged him. “You’ve only just woken up.”

“Someone go notify the Martial God,” said Wang Xizhi, but Xie An shook his head.

“He already said that even if Chen Xing didn’t wake up, he’d return by tomorrow or the day after.”

“Where’s Xiang Shu?” Chen Xing asked. “Where’s Qianjun-ge? And where did Xiao Shan go?”

Xie Daoyun brought him back to his room so they could explain everything to him slowly. Huan Yi came along too, along with Wang Xizhi, Xie Xuan, and the others, all gathering inside the room.

Chen Xing drank some tea. It helped clear his mind slightly. He lifted his gaze toward Xie An, a question in his eyes. Xie An understood, and told him how long he’d been out. “I was asleep for three months?” said Chen Xing. “Hmm, about the same as last time. Better than I expected. Where are we?”

“Shouyang,” said Xie Daoyun.

Chen Xing frowned. “Why is everyone here? What are you all doing in Shouyang?”

Xie An hesitated, as if choosing his words carefully. “One thing at a time,” he said at last. “The Martial God has been tracking Sima Wei’s movements, searching for Huanmo Palace.”

“Oh. Then it must be nearby. No wonder he wasn’t by my side when I woke up. Has he found anything?”

Xie Daoyun shook her head. “He returns once a month,” said Wang Xizhi. “He said that whether you wake up or not, he’ll be back by the

seventeenth.”

“Mm.” Chen Xing nodded. “And what about everyone else? What happened to them after that battle?”

“Feng Qianjun and Xiaoshifu Xiao Shan have both gone missing,” Xie Daoyun said. “Shulü Kong said he will bring them back no matter what, so you don’t need to worry.”

“How can I possibly not worry?” Chen Xing murmured, exhausted. This was the outcome he had most feared. From the moment those two had begun using resentment to wield their artifacts, he had felt an sense of foreboding, and in the end, their fates had been sealed by the crimson glow that flared within their hearts. But how had they ingested the Demon God’s Blood in the first place?

The more Chen Xing thought about it, the more his head hurt. Fortunately, he had planted a seed of the Heart Lamp in his companions’ hearts long ago as a precaution—perhaps they still had a hope of counteracting the Demon God’s Blood.

“Three days after the battle at Yique, Fu Jian returned to Chang’an,” Xie Xuan told Chen Xing. “He had no more drought fiends, but he still decided to go to war.”

When the Yin Yang Mirror shattered, Wang Ziye had vanished completely. Fu Jian had said nothing upon his return to Chang’an; he simply gathered his forces and proceeded with his original plans. His army marched toward Shouyang, determined to reclaim his honor. Murong Chong, meanwhile, had abandoned the Silver Cavalry, left Luoyang, and disappeared.

“Where is the Soulfall Bell?” Chen Xing asked.

“All the artifacts are in the Martial God’s care,” Xie An replied. “I’m sure they’re safe.”

Wang Xizhi, seated nearby, nodded. “We came to check on Anshi. The battle will begin in a few days, and we’ll all have to return soon.”

Chen Xing nodded, his brow furrowing. “What about Tuoba Yan?”

“He’s gone,” said Xie An.

“Where did he go? Is he with Murong Chong?”

“He died. To ensure his body couldn’t be used against us, the Martial God cremated him over Lake Chao.”

As Xie An spoke, Xie Daoyun rose, retrieved a small box from the bookshelf, and handed it to Chen Xing. Inside was the ring Tuoba Yan had once given him.

“Where is Fu Jian’s army now?” asked Chen Xing.

“They’re stationed in Xiangcheng,” Xie Xuan replied. “There’s been no sign of battle yet. Shouyang has become the front line. Technically, you all should have evacuated already, but since no fighting has begun, no one sees the need to panic just yet.”

Chen Xing nodded. “Who’s been taking care of me these past few months?”

“I was with you most of the time,” Xie An told him. “And when Daoyun heard you were unwell, she came to check on you.” Chen Xing nodded in thanks.

“You should rest a bit more,” said Wang Xhizhi. “You must be feeling weak after spending so long asleep.”

And so they all left. Chen Xing, who had in fact been feeling drowsy again, drifted into another brief sleep. This time, he woke up much sooner, and Xie Daoyun brought him porridge. As he ate, he asked many more questions, and Xie Daoyun answered them one by one.

After the Battle of Yi River, Wang Ziye and his drought fiends had apparently vanished without a trace. No one had seen hide nor hair of them. But Chen Xing had a nagging feeling that things weren’t going to be simple. True, Wang Ziye had lost one of his three immortal souls to the Soulfall Bell, but Chiyou was still alive. It was clear now that they had been underestimating Chiyou, and that this mistake might prove their downfall. The Demon God rarely showed himself, and they had allowed themselves to assume that meant Wang Ziye was the primary threat.

But surely a shattered Demon God had severe limitations. If Chiyou were capable of more, he would have acted personally, not relied on Wang Ziye for everything. Had Xiang Shu gone to investigate their hiding place? Hopefully, they would be able to find Huanmo Palace and put an end to this before the Qin-Jin war broke out.

For now, all Chen Xing could do was hope that Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan were safe. Chiyou had taken them, which likely meant he intended to use them for something. If so, then they weren't in immediate danger—for now.

Only one year remained until Chen Xing's final deadline.

That afternoon, Chen Xing sat silently, lost in thought. The more he dwelled on Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan, the more restless he became. If he knew where they were, he would have gone after them the moment he woke up, but there was no trace of them. He didn't even know where Chiyou was hiding.

He tried using the Heart Lamp. Everything seemed normal; his soul power had slowly recovered during his slumber. As he was using it, though, something in the distance seemed to respond—a faint flicker echoing his Heart Lamp's signal.

It was Xiang Shu! Chen Xing knew it immediately, though he couldn't determine the exact distance between them. It felt just like that day in Xiangyang City when he had found Xiang Shu in the street. Over the past three years, their bond had grown stronger with every life-and-death battle they fought together.

"Where are you?" Chen Xing murmured, activating the Heart Lamp once more. Again, Xiang Shu's distant presence flickered in response. But when Chen Xing tried a third time, Xiang Shu ignored him, perhaps worried that Chen Xing, barely recovered from his long sleep, would exhaust himself.

The next day, Chen Xing ate quite a bit and felt much more energized. He drank the ginseng soup that Xie Daoyun had prepared to replenish his energy and blood, and the color finally returned to his face. Wrapped in a fine robe, he sat in the courtyard, gazing at the autumn landscape under the vast sky.

All of a sudden, he heard a ruckus outside. He thought it might have been Xiang Shu returning, but when he went out to look, he saw a middle-

aged Han man dressed in a Qin official's attire walking into the residence of Shouyang's governor, holding a scroll.

A messenger from Fu Jian? Xie Xuan stepped forward to handle the situation while Xie An and Wang Xizhi quickly retreated to avoid being seen by the messenger.

"Who are those people?" Chen Xing softly asked a young official.

"They're here to persuade us to surrender. Xie-daren and the others are hiding behind the screen. If you wish to listen, Chen-daren, then please follow me; I'll take you to them."

After the sacrificial rites, Chen Xing's reputation as the Great Exorcist had spread throughout the Jiangnan region; Xie An's affairs were almost never hidden from him. Chen Xing didn't intend to eavesdrop, but there was something familiar about that messenger, so he decided to follow the official over to the screen in the hall.

"It's been such a long time," Xie Xuan was saying with a smile. He clearly knew the messenger well.

Chen Xing stepped behind the screen and exchanged polite nods with Xie An and Wang Xizhi, who were standing there already. Peering through the gap in the screen, Chen Xing caught a glimpse of the man's profile but still couldn't place him.

"The emperor is fully aware of the Beifu Army's strength," the middle-aged official said, stroking his beard. "Murong Chui has already led his forces to Feixi…"

Now that Chen Xing heard the man's voice, it clicked: That was Governor Zhu Xu of Xiangyang!

Chen Xing made a gesture to Xie An that he knew the messenger. Xie An nodded and exchanged glances with Wang Xizhi. Chen Xing pointed toward the outside and then at himself, mouthing that he wanted to have a word with him.

"…we will attack the city in the near future," Zhu Xu was saying tonelessly. "Xie Xuan, this is the last chance I have secured for my homeland. The Heavenly King does not wish to cause unnecessary

casualties. He asked me to pass along this message: ‘Diplomacy before force.’ He said you would understand what it means.”

Xie Xuan smiled amiably. “After Xiangyang fell, did he take good care of the common people?”

Zhu Xu didn’t rise to the bait. In truth, after Murong Chui had conquered Xiangyang nearly three years ago, not only did he fail to uphold his agreement with the surrendering Zhu Xu, he looted the city and slaughtered citizens. “That was because General Murong sought revenge for an accident that ruined half of his face,” Zhu Xu said. “If it hadn’t been for that, I’m confident I could have protected the people of the city.”

So now this is my fault? thought Chen Xing. *I set fire to Murong Chui’s face, so he massacred the city’s residents?*

“Let him come, then,” said Xie Xuan. “There’s no point in arguing. What more is there to say?”

“Tomorrow, Shouyang will be engulfed in the flames of war,” said Zhu Xu. “Xie Xuan, forgive me for being blunt, but you have a mere eighty thousand soldiers—you’re really overestimating yourselves.”

Xie Xuan chuckled. “Has Fu Jian’s insanity in Luoyang been cured?” His sharp tongue was a trait that had been passed down through the Xie family. In fact, none of this group of scholars, from Xie An to Chen Xing, were in the habit of mincing words, even when speaking to the enemy. Zhu Xu stared at Xie Xuan but said nothing. “Be careful, Zhu-daren,” Xie Xuan added quietly. “He might stab you if you catch him in a bad mood. Servants, see him out!”

His attempts at persuasion had failed. War, Zhu Xu realized, was inevitable. The Han people were always so stubborn. If this had been him, back when he was defending Xiangyang, he wouldn’t have surrendered either—he only did so in the end because he was captured and didn’t want to die in disgrace. Sending him to deliver the “diplomacy before force” message was merely Fu Jian’s way of avenging the humiliation he’d suffered from Xie An at Yi River.

“Then I’ll take my leave,” Zhu Xu said politely. He set the letter he’d brought down in front of Xie Xuan; it was a missive urging the Jin to surrender. “See you on the battlefield tomorrow.”

Xie Xuan stayed seated. He made no move to either read the letter or send Zhu Xu off.

“Aren’t you going to read it?” Zhu Xu asked.

“It’s hardly the *Lantingji Xu*.[8] What’s so special about a barbarian’s writing? It’s a waste of time. Leave.”

Zhu Xu looked at him silently for a moment, then turned and left the prefectural governor’s residence. As soon as he was gone, Xie Xuan stood up and went to confer with Xie An and Wang Xizhi.

Out in the courtyard, Zhu Xu was about to mount his horse and leave when he heard a voice behind him.

“Zhu-daren,” Chen Xing said, smiling, “it’s been a long time.”

Zhu Xu turned around in evident confusion. The evening light was dwindling, and it took a moment of squinting for him to recognize Chen Xing. His eyes widened. “You?!”

They exchanged greetings. Three years had passed since their last meeting, and it felt like it had been even longer. A complicated mixture of emotions stirred in Zhu Xu. After he surrendered to the Qin court, he had spent time in prison before finally being reinstated to office a year ago. Over the intervening years, he’d heard rumors of Chen Xing’s activities across the Divine Land and of his strange powers and supernatural feats. Zhu Xu had dismissed these stories as fabrications, but after the Battle of Yi River, he was sure that the Chen Xing of old had not deceived him.

As Chen Xing carefully watched Zhu Xu’s expression, something occurred to him—he reached out and infused Zhu Xu’s body with the Heart Lamp. Once he was satisfied that Zhu Xu was not possessed by Wang Ziye, he relaxed; Wang Ziye’s soul possession technique had left him on constant alert.

He did, however, notice something strange as the Heart Lamp’s energy flowed into Zhu Xu: There was a seed of the Heart Lamp in Zhu Xu’s heart meridian. How had it gotten there? Had Chen Xing unintentionally planted it there when he’d first met Xiang Shu on the high platform of Zhu Xu’s residence?

“It’s been three years since we last met,” Zhu Xu said with a sigh. “I hear you’ve been busy. I remember, back then, your grand ambition was to restore the practice of exorcism to the world. Have you succeeded?”

“No,” Chen Xing replied with feeling. “The future remains shrouded in mist.”

“The entire court is saying that Wang Ziye is a sorcerer who can resurrect the dead and that he controls the emperor. You defeated him at Yique, and the drought fiend army was handily eliminated. The crisis in the Divine Land that you spoke of three years ago must have been resolved, right?”

Chen Xing gave him a bitter smile. “Far from it. We solved one problem, but another has arisen. Worse, now Fu Jian is invading the south. There’s no saying how many will die before this is all over… I fear that Wang Ziye might…return from the ashes. Ridding the world of its resentment is one thing, but ridding people’s hearts of it is another matter entirely.”

Zhu Xu took this in. “What else can I do for you? To be honest, young friend, since my surrender to the Qin, I’ve been scorned by thousands, spat on by tens of thousands… I’m used to it by now.”

“How is Fu Jian?” Chen Xing asked, frowning. This was the real reason he had sought out Zhu Xu.

“He’s been much calmer since his return from Yi River, but his determination to conquer the south has only grown stronger.”

“Wang Ziye hasn’t shown his face since then? What about Princess Qinghe? And what are the others doing?”

Zhu Xu briefly described the situation at court, though he had only limited knowledge; given his position, he was excluded from the center of power. He was, at least, able to confirm that Fu Jian had said nothing since his return about what had happened, nor had he punished anyone from the Murong family. Everything seemed to have returned to normal, and Fu Jian was resolutely pushing forward with his southern campaign. He’d assembled an army of more than a million soldiers and he intended to outmatch the Jin with overwhelming force.

“More than a million?!” Chen Xing repeated.

“Feixi is so crowded, you can barely turn around.”

Chen Xing was thinking about how much resentment would build up in a clash between millions of soldiers, but Zhu Xu was thinking about a different problem. For as long as there had been wars, the idea of leading such a large army had been considered foolish; not even a legendary strategist like Zhuge Liang would have tried it. The only general bold enough to say “the more, the merrier” was Han Xin. Just managing supplies and command for so many soldiers was a monumental challenge.

“Where’s your protector?” asked Zhu Xu. “I had no idea, back when he was imprisoned, that he was the Great Chanyu of the north. Please convey my apologies to him.”

Chen Xing smiled. “He’s out on a mission. He won’t hold it against you.”

“He slaughtered my people, so I have no regrets about locking him up—but then he followed you and saved the innocent. In a sense, he redeemed himself.”

“It was a misunderstanding. He’s not one to indiscriminately kill innocent people.”

“Oh?”

Chen Xing just smiled. It was complicated to explain, and the sky was growing dark; he didn’t want to delay Zhu Xu too long. “He’s a true hero in this chaotic world.”

Zhu Xu nodded. “I suppose I was wrong about him. Ah well, I’ll take my leave now…”

Just then, someone approached the door of the residence, then paused in their tracks. Chen Xing looked up.

It was Xiang Shu!

Chen Xing couldn’t control himself; he sprinted toward him. Xiang Shu looked travel-worn. He wore a leather pouch strapped across his shoulder—it likely held the magical artifacts—and he carried the Acala Blade and a longbow on his back. His wrists were covered by leather guards, his hunting boots caked with mud. Even with his face looking a little gaunt, with stubble that seemed hastily shaven, he was as handsome as

ever. He had the rugged aura of a wanderer who had crossed mountains and withstood wind and rain.

Chen Xing was grinning. “You’re back!” he shouted, and embraced Xiang Shu tightly.

Xiang Shu raised a hand and patted Chen Xing’s head. He shot a suspicious glance at Zhu Xu, though he did offer him a nod.

Zhu Xu chuckled. “So it’s you. I didn’t recognize you in the dark.”

“Zhu Xu?” Xiang Shu asked in a low voice. He remembered Zhu Xu from the single passing glance he’d gotten at him after he was captured and brought back to Xiangyang.

Zhu Xu nodded. “You two didn’t even know each other before, and now look at the close bond you share. In chaotic times like these, who can say what tomorrow holds? Stay safe, both of you.”

Xiang Shu gave Chen Xing a little push; their guest was still there, and they needed to see him off before they caught up. Together, they escorted Zhu Xu off the grounds of the mansion amid the falling maple leaves. Zhu Xu mounted his horse, nodded at them, and left the city of Shouyang.

Once he was gone, Chen Xing grabbed Xiang Shu’s hand and began assaulting him with questions. “Where have you been these past three months? How did you lose so much weight? Did you find them?”

“I found them, yes,” Xiang Shu replied, “but it’ll take some effort to get in and rescue them. We can talk about it later. Right now, I need to see Xie An.”

Chapter 86

THE ATMOSPHERE in the governor's residence was thick with tension as Xie Xuan spread out the map. They'd all prepared for the coming battle, but they knew there was no way Shouyang could resist Fu Jian's cavalry; like Xiangyang three years prior, it was only a matter of time before the city fell and another massacre took place. As soon as the Beifu Army had established its camp in Shouyang, Xie An had taken the prudent measure of evacuating about 90 percent of the city's civilians to Moling,[9] leaving behind only conscripted workers and a handful of craftspeople. Those few remaining citizens then left under another military evacuation order that had been issued when Zhu Xu came to persuade them all to surrender. By the time Xiang Shu returned, most of the residences along the city road were empty, and the rest were about to become empty.

"During tonight's third watch, the remaining Beifu soldiers must pull back to Luojian, twenty miles away from Shouyang, to look for an opportunity to engage the enemy hand-to-hand and weaken their vanguard," Xie An said. "Oh, excellent! Martial God, you're back!"

With Xiang Shu back, they all sat down in the hall to chat and eat. The dinner that had been prepared for them included all kinds of scrumptious Shouyang delicacies; it was as extravagant as a prisoner's final meal.

"On my way back, I ran into General Liu Laozhi," Xiang Shu said. "He was preparing for an ambush in Luojian. How many reinforcements did he bring?"

"Five thousand. I hope Laozhi can move quicker," Xie Xuan said. He turned to Xie An. "There's never been a war with this many participants before."

Chen Xing blinked, and he wasn't the only one. Thinking back on historical records he had read, he realized that Xie Xuan was right. Chibi was the only battle in the past century that was worth mentioning in the same breath as this one, but even in the Battle of Chibi, Cao Cao only had

five hundred thousand soldiers at his command. This was going to be the largest battle in history.

“Mm, seems like it,” Xie An replied.

“Why do you all talk like it’s someone else’s war?” Chen Xing asked.

“Don’t be fooled by my nonchalant demeanor, Xiaoshidi,” Xie An said. “The truth is, everybody here is scared shitless right now.”

Everyone burst out laughing except Chen Xing, who huffed in exasperation.

“Will the Martial God follow us into battle?” asked Wang Xizhi.

“I have something more important to do,” Xiang Shu replied. “You guys are on your own.”

Xie An leaned over to talk to Chen Xing. “Now that the Martial God has returned, I may have to request your approval for a leave of absence… While I certainly shouldn’t ignore the problem of Qianjun-xiaoxiongdi and Xiao Shan-xiaoxiongdi, we’re facing a national disaster. If I’m going to have to perform an exorcism in the next few days, I really can’t take on field duty—”

Chen Xing lost it. “Just fight your war! Why are you still thinking about exorcism right now?!”

His outburst was greeted by another round of laughter.

Xiang Shu finished eating very quickly, and after the meal, everyone paused their conversation and looked at him. They expected him to say something, perhaps even share some news that might turn the tide of the war, but all Xiang Shu said was, “I’m taking a bath. Chen Xing, keep talking with them.” Then he got up and left.

There was something Chen Xing wanted to ask him, but he figured he’d have time to ask his question later, so he continued chatting with Xie An, Wang Xizhi, and the others.

When Xie An noticed that day had turned to night, he said, “All right, everyone, please get some rest. We still need to retreat when the third watch begins. Xiaoshidi, I’ll take you back to your room.”

Chen Xing figured that meant Xie An either had something to say to him or wanted to see Xiang Shu, but then he saw Wang Xizhi get up, smiling, and follow Xie An. A moment later, Xie Xuan joined them. Huan Yi, who had been with them on their mission to Luoyang, had just returned to the hall after finishing his military affairs; he took a sip of tea and tailed them.

Chen Xing was confused, to say the least.

The whole group followed Chen Xing. Xie An chatted with Huan Yi, and Wang Xizhi sighed mournfully, lamenting all the lovely scenery in Shouyang that the Hu were about to come and destroy. Chen Xing kept his mouth shut, but thought, *You guys are just looking for Xiang Shu. If anyone saw you following me like this they'd think you were about to start a fight.*

When he reached the courtyard outside his bedroom, Chen Xing was surprised to find it bathed in light. Xie Daoyun was handing Xiang Shu a lantern, which Xiang Shu then hung on a tree. In fact, there were lanterns hanging all over the courtyard, shining even more brilliantly than those of the Lantern Festival. Someone had also set up several flat couches and tea tables with fresh fruit and refreshments.

"Wow!" said Chen Xing.

"Come, come," Xie Daoyun said, smiling. Xiang Shu was standing under a tree, looking at Chen Xing.

"What are you guys doing? Celebrating a festival?" Chen Xing asked. *Are you all secretly planning to abandon the city to preserve your lives? Is that why you keep breaking out all the good food and drink?*

Xie Daoyun kept smiling. "We're celebrating your birthday. After three months, your Martial God has finally returned."

Xiang Shu hadn't lied about bathing. In fact, he seemed to have tidied himself up specifically for this occasion, and now he was wearing a navy blue martial official's robe. With clear eyes, he looked at Chen Xing for confirmation. "Today is the day, right?"

"Even if it's not, let's celebrate it today," Wang Xizhi said. He was smiling now too.

“It is.” Chen Xing’s eyes were moist. Even in the chaos of war, there were still tiny parts of the world with warmth in them.

“Your comrades are all here today.” Xiang Shu guided Chen Xing to a couch and sat down beside him, looking sideways at him. “You’re no longer alone.”

Chen Xing was overcome. He couldn’t find the words to respond properly, so he settled for, “Well, that goes without saying.”

Xie An, Xie Daoyun, Xie Xuan, Wang Xizhi, and Huan Yi all found seats too. A wave of melancholy came over Chen Xing again when he thought about how two of the people closest to him—Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan—were absent, and Tuoba Yan was dead, but he knew this was the wrong moment for grief. He smiled at them all and said, “Thank you, all of you.”

“Tianchi is nineteen years old today.” Xie An laughed.

“Mm-hm. I’ve turned nineteen.”

“You’ll be twenty next year,” Xie Daoyun pointed out. “It’ll be time for you to be capped.”[10]

Chen Xing hummed. “I’ll invite you all to my capping ceremony then.” Everyone murmured in agreement.

“You know, I’ve entirely forgotten what we were doing when we were nineteen,” said Wang Xizhi.

“We were probably out wandering with swords at our waists, looking for immortals everywhere under the sky,” Huan Yi said. “And acting thick-skinned and shameless as we sought a master who would take us on as apprentices, ha.”

Everyone laughed.

“Who would have thought that after a lifetime of searching, I’d find a Great Exorcist at my advanced age?” Xie An joked. “And now I’m even celebrating his birthday with him. Life is full of surprises.” Fu Jian was about to lead an army of millions to raze Shouyang to the ground tomorrow, yet at this moment, those matters seemed to have been cast aside.

“Let’s have a drink,” Xiang Shu interjected. “I propose a toast to you all. Thank you for taking care of Chen Xing over the past three months. I

might have to trouble you to do it again in the future.”

Xie An shot Xiang Shu a narrow-eyed look but prudently kept his mouth shut. Chen Xing didn’t notice Xie An’s reaction, though, nor anything else amiss. He was busy watching Xiang Shu pour the wine and hand them each a cup.

They all raised their cups and toasted. Chen Xing noticed that Xie Daoyun’s eyes looked a bit misty as she drank. “Daoyun?” he asked.

Xie Daoyun wiped her eyes and laughed, then shook her head. “Qing-er must have been reincarnated by now, right?”

This seemed to strike a chord with Wang Xizhi. “People who’ve been reincarnated… Do you think we’ll be able to find them again?” he asked, sounding moved.

Chen Xing thought about it for a while. Ultimately, he admitted, “I don’t know.”

The divine veins stretched all the way across the vault of the sky; the earth veins circulated endlessly, for millennia on millennia. Fu Jian’s army of millions stood at the ready outside Shouyang, but here in the city there were bright, colorful lanterns that shone like the heart of the Divine Land. They illuminated the world around them during the dark, gloomy night.

“But,” Chen Xing continued thoughtfully, “heaven itself is what allows souls to be reincarnated, so there must be a reason a reincarnated person doesn’t remember who they were in their previous life, no matter how hard they clung to it. There must be a reason we can’t find them in their next life. Isn’t it enough to know that somewhere, somehow, she’s alive and living happily?”

Xie Daoyun nodded.

“Xiaoshidi,” Xie An said, “please explain it to us.”

Chen Xing was looking at the colorful lanterns all over the courtyard, spellbound. Xie An’s words startled him back to the present. “Explain what?”

“About the sky above our head,” Xie An said, choked up, “and the earth under our feet. It has been a long, long time since we’ve all had a chance to talk about the profound theory of the Dao.”

Wang Xizhi nodded. “When I was a child, I was certain that the Dao was a puzzle that could be solved. As I grew up, I came to believe that it was beyond comprehension. But now, at this stage, I have a shred of hope again. Perhaps the Dao gradually becomes clearer as one gets older, though it remains impossible to articulate clearly.”

“Is this what Kong Qiu meant by ‘At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of heaven’?”[11] Chen Xing smiled and thought about it. “During my apprenticeship, I didn’t learn much about the Dao. For the most part, my lessons were about exorcism techniques or artifacts. The Dao, I feel, perhaps refers to the true form of the world—of the people living on the earth and every feeling we have during our stay here. And while this ‘true form’ includes destiny, it’s not only about that. Generally speaking, it’s just about where we come from, what we are, what we want to do, and where we’re going. These things… Well, if you all don’t mind me being long-winded, we can chat about them. We don’t know what will happen after tomorrow, after all.”

“Do tell, do tell,” Xie An said.

“Yes, I’d like to hear more about it,” Wang Xizhi agreed. Huan Yi had been planning to get up and go attend to military matters, but he was so intrigued that he stayed where he was and listened.

Chen Xing’s clear eyes reflected the bright lanterns in the courtyard. He turned his head a little to smile at Xiang Shu, then set about explaining to everyone what he had studied during his time with his shifu.

“Legend has it that when Pangu split heaven and earth apart, all existence came into being. Pangu’s eyes became the sun and the moon, while the first ‘One’ to be created between heaven and earth transformed into the Dragon God. When it opened its eyes, the day dawned, and when it closed them, the night fell. This cycle set the heaven and earth veins moving, and thus, time was born…”

Chen Xing narrated the story slowly. He began with Pangu creating the sky, then the collapse of Mount Buzhou; he told the stories of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors,[12] and of the great war that swept clean mountains and seas thousands of years ago and the subsequent retreat of the gods. He explained how the Divine Land had returned to mortals’ hands at the Battle of Muye.[13] His words transported them away from the current era

until they were standing in the river of time, watching the rises and falls, the triumphs and tribulations of the Divine Land.

Eventually, he spoke of the strange connection between the heaven and earth veins, the convergence and divergence of the world's immortal souls and mortal forms, the bizarre power of the multitude of stars, the yao's internal cores, the humans' secret techniques, and the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth, which had vanished long ago. When he concluded, the courtyard was still.

"So what is the world's true form?" Chen Xing said. "I think everyone has a different opinion on this. I've heard so many different suggestions but never found someone who could give me a single clear answer. Personally, I think the 'true form' is actually formless. Flowers are flowers and trees are trees—these things are certain. But if we're talking about the world's true form, all we can say for sure is that it's uncertain and will always stay uncertain. It's those little things we hold dear inside our hearts. Think about the Divine Land, or even the heaven and earth veins: They each have a form, but they exist only within our spiritual knowledge. That is where the Dao is."

"So is it the Heart Lamp?" asked Xie Daoyun.

Chen Xing smiled. "The Heart Lamp is its shape, not the true form itself. Moreover, I think everyone has their own Heart Lamp; it's not just me. Otherwise, why would we all be sitting here right now, hm?"

His meaning was obvious. The Han—even Sima Yao, far away in Jiankang—still had pride in their country, and they were going to give this battle their all even knowing they would die in the attempt. Like a lamp swaying in the wind and rain during the gloomy night of Fu Jian's arrival in the south, their faith would shine in all directions and illuminate this miserable era. It wasn't just Zhu Xu, but also Xie An, Xie Xuan, Wang Xizhi, Xiang Shu, Feng Qianjun, Xiao Shan, and many others who had things that they clung tightly to in their hearts. Chen Xing had always felt that was true.

Just as a human soul was drawn toward a speck of bright light, once that light shone, their Heart Lamps would ignite to guide them through their lives.

Chen Xing had a sudden idea. "Shall I play the qin for everyone?"

He went to fetch the qin. When he played it, the sound was melodious and mellow. It was that song—the Fusheng Melody. While everyone else sat, quietly listening, Xiang Shu got up and went inside. He came out a moment later with his Qiang flute in hand and went to stand behind Chen Xing.

They played together, the music reverberating from their instruments. The simple, clean tones of the qin and the ever-shifting sound of the Qiang flute blended and twined around each other. This iteration of the Fusheng Melody was unlike any they had played before. They were flowing through a turbulent river, experiencing the world's winds and rains, watching azure seas turn into mulberry fields.

When it was over, their audience released gentle sighs laden with emotion.

"All right," Huan Yi said, "it's time for us old geezers to go. Let's give them some time alone."

The others got up, one after another. "We'll gather at the back door in four hours," said Xie An.

Xiang Shu nodded, and they dispersed. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu were left sitting side by side on the couch in the middle of a courtyard full of colorful lanterns. They hadn't been able to have a good talk since Xiang Shu returned.

"Hey," Chen Xing said, smiling, "where does your mind keep going? What are you thinking about, Protector?"

"Can we not talk about exorcism this evening?" Xiang Shu asked. "I promise you: I will bring them back."

"Have you found Wang Ziye's hiding place?" Chen Xing asked, but Xiang Shu turned his head and gave Chen Xing a serious look. "All right, I won't ask about it. It's just, I'm already feeling much better physically… I think if we leave Shouyang tomorrow, we won't need to follow them south. It'd be better—"

Xiang Shu frowned deeply. "What did I just say?"

"All right, all right."

He didn’t want to get into an argument with Xiang Shu when they’d just reunited. Now that Xiang Shu was back, Chen Xing was determined: No matter what Xiang Shu did to him, he would not get angry.

There was a moment of silence between them. Then Chen Xing smiled at him. “I really missed you. When I woke up and you weren’t by my side, I panicked.”

“I’ve been to several places over the last three months,” Xiang Shu said. “I should’ve stayed behind and taken care of you so that at least you wouldn’t sleep for so long, but I weighed the pros and cons and went.”

“Was it to…” …*find Chiyou’s hiding spot?* he wanted to ask, but he knew that asking it would make Xiang Shu change the subject again. “Forget it, never mind.”

“I also took a trip to Mount Hua. I went to the place where you lived with your shifu.”

This surprised Chen Xing. “You know where that is?”

“Xie Anshi told me the location. I took a look at the place where you grew up. Was your shifu sick and bedridden all year round?”

Chen Xing wasn’t sure if he was more amused or embarrassed. “Yes. Mount Hua was a complete mess when I left; it hadn’t been cleaned up at all. Were you looking for some ancient texts passed down by exorcists?”

“Growing up in that place while also having to take care of your shifu,” Xiang Shu mused aloud. “It must’ve been very lonely.”

Chen Xing’s first instinct was to laugh it off and tell him it was okay, but it occurred to him that, throughout his short life, that was all he’d ever done—laugh it off. What was the worst that could happen if he told the truth every once in a while? “Yes,” he admitted. “It was lonely.”

“When I saw Zhu Xu today, I thought of the day you left Mount Hua and came to Xiangyang to find me.” Xiang Shu stood up and moved until he was under the lanterns, then raised his head to look at them, his eyes reflecting some unidentifiable emotion.

Chen Xing, too, had remembered that day when he met Zhu Xu again. The corners of his mouth curled up in a little smile.

“You found me and brought me out of my cell,” Xiang Shu said, facing away from Chen Xing. “In truth, you’ve never wanted me to act solely as your protector, right? Since the beginning, you’ve seen me as the person who would accompany you for the rest your life, however brief or long it turned out to be.”

“Ah. You finally understand, huh?” Chen Xing’s smile took on a tinge of sadness. “That’s why I was so sad that day, when you told me you didn’t want to be my protector. But that was really on me. I didn’t take your feelings into account…”

Standing there in the courtyard, Xiang Shu turned to the side slightly to look carefully at Chen Xing, the light of the lanterns playing over his face. Chen Xing looked back at him, dazed. Under the starlight, his profile was incomparably handsome; he was leagues more attractive than any other person Chen Xing had ever met. For some reason, though, Xiang Shu’s usually furrowed brow was smooth, his normal frown displaced by a determined, tender expression.

“Xing-er,” he said.

Chen Xing felt his face turn bright red at the nickname. He didn’t know what to do. “You…”

“I will not let you die,” Xiang Shu told him, his sincerity evident in every line of his body. “No. You will *not* die.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Chen Xing didn’t know how to react.

“Because in your heart, you don’t actually want to die. Also, I came back today because I wanted to tell you that you aren’t alone. Not at all. Do you get it now?”

A warm feeling welled up in Chen Xing’s heart. This era of theirs was long, bleak, and full of sorrow, characterized by the all-encompassing darkness of the Silence of All Magic—and hearing Xiang Shu’s words was like seeing a ray of light break through the clouds. People said that Chen Xing was the lamp in the dark, but here, right now, Chen Xing felt certain that it was Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu was the ray that shone on him in this sunless despair.

In the end, Chen Xing acknowledged it. “Yes. If there is any hope, I do want to keep on living. I want to do many things…with you. But if my

fate is sealed, then my greatest hope is that my departure will allow you, Xiao Shan, Feng-dage, Xie-shixiong, and many others to have a good life."

As he spoke, Chen Xing stepped forward and gently embraced Xiang Shu, resting his head on his shoulder. Xiang Shu's breath hitched, but Chen Xing held him for barely a moment before letting go.

"But…oh, Shulü Kong, I've deceived you and everyone else," he murmured.

Xiang Shu was silent. Chen Xing raised his head to look at him.

"I only have one year left to live."

Still Xiang Shu did not reply. In fact, he didn't even look surprised. He just watched Chen Xing in silence.

"It's because of Sui Xing. When it descends on the world, it only stays for twenty years. I've never confirmed it myself, but it has been recorded in ancient texts. It was Shifu who informed me when I turned sixteen. For a while, I, too, had faith in my luck, but ever since the drought fiend chaos, I feel more and more—"

"Finally you spit it out," Xiang Shu said. Chen Xing stared at him, stunned.

"You…already knew?" he asked in a low voice. "How did you know?"

"Pu Yang found out the truth for me. I went to your shifu's house to look for the records you both left behind, to confirm it. If the records are accurate, you won't live past your birthday next year. So this day marks the start of the last year of your life."

"Right," said Chen Xing, relieved. "It's not that I've never thought of fighting my own destiny, and it's not that I'm afraid. I don't want to live like I'm just a character in a play, either. But it's so hard. We still lost at Yi River, you see. It's not that I don't want to fight it, it's just that I have more important things to do. What's my one life compared to the countless thousands of lives in the Divine Land? That's why, Xiang Shu."

I like you so, so much, he thought. But he didn't say it.

"I think the day my wish is fulfilled will also be the day I meet my end," he added, "and when it's over, I won't be able to promise you

anything anymore. I can't promise you in this life, and perhaps not even your next, but…" Chen Xing smiled at Xiang Shu. "One day, after a long, long time has passed, all of this will fade from your memories. You'll slowly forget what I look like, just like my parents' faces have become blurred and unclear in my mind."

Xiang Shu looked at Chen Xing in silence.

"But what I leave behind for you will be this beautiful, vibrant world. If I can make it happen, that will be my gift to you, the one gift I can give. Am I right to say that you often think I disregard your feelings for the sake of the Divine Land? That's not true. The entire reason I want the world's magic to recover, the reason I want everything in this world to prosper and flourish, is because this world…has you in it. This is the world that has you in it, has Feng-dage, Xiao Shan, and Xie-shixiong. That fact, and that fact only, means my departure is worth it."

Xiang Shu's frown finally faded. "I understand."

"So from tomorrow on, stop worrying about me dying, okay?" Chen Xing said, gently and earnestly. "Stay with me, and let's see this journey through, and I'll always remember—in this world, there's someone who cares so much about me he called in all of his friends and spent his family's entire fortune, all so I could keep living, with him by my side."

Xiang Shu's hand clenched into an involuntary fist. He turned his head away so he was no longer looking at Chen Xing. "I will also remember." Chen Xing raised his eyebrows, gazing at the side of Xiang Shu's face. "I will remember that there was once someone who was willing to burn up his three immortal souls and seven mortal forms, all to become a blazing light that shone gloriously upon this world."

Xiang Shu's eyes shone with unshed tears. He turned around and brushed past Chen Xing like a gust of wind.

"Xiang Shu," Chen Xing called after him. "Xiang Shu!"

He started to follow, but when he saw that Xiang Shu was crying, he stopped in his tracks. For a time, he just stood there in the courtyard, dazed.

"I…Xiang Shu," Chen Xing whispered. "Xiang Shu, I…" Then, with only himself to hear: "Xing-er really does like you so, so much."

He’d come into this world alone, so it made sense that he should leave in the same manner. There were so many things Chen Xing wanted to say right now, but he knew that once he said them, it would be just like that day by the shore of Hong Lake—there would be a man who set aside everything else to take him away from this mundane world and its responsibilities, take him to…

Chen Xing pushed open the door and came to an abrupt halt. There, on a pillow on the couch, sat a moon-shell bracelet.

A year ago, during the Autumn Deity Festival, he and Xiang Shu had bought a pair of those bracelets at a fair in Jiankang. Chen Xing had forgotten all about it since then, given that he’d spent most of that time running all over the place and also fallen into several comas. He didn’t even know what he’d done with his own half of the set.

But Xiang Shu had kept the one he bought this whole time. The red of the string had faded, and the shell had lost its luster over the year.

Chen Xing picked up the bracelet. He was silent for some time. Then he turned around and walked briskly out the door.

The military officials had finished getting the carriages ready, and Xie An was doing one final inspection when Chen Xing rushed into the courtyard.

“Where’s Xiang Shu? Xie-shixiong, where’s his room?”

Xie An looked at him blankly. “Doesn’t he share a room with you? No other room has been arranged for him.”

Three months ago, when Xiang Shu had first brought Chen Xing to Shouyang, he’d spent several days at Chen Xing’s side, meaning he’d resided in Chen Xing’s room. And because he returned just a few hours before their planned retreat, no one had arranged accommodations for him.

“Then…where are his things? What about the stuff he had with him?” Chen Xing asked, but he realized it was no use: Xiang Shu had already left. “Get me a horse.”

“Wait! Wait!” said Xie An. “Xiaoshidi, you need to follow us; there’s only one way to get out of the city now. I’ll send a scout at once to look for the Martial God—”

“No need to worry about me!” Chen Xing said, already leaving.

“No! The Martial God specifically ordered—”

Chen Xing ran out, ignoring him. He was just about to mount a horse when Xie Xuan suddenly rushed in.

“Go!” Xie Xuan shouted. “We need to leave the city—Fu Jian’s army is here!”

Xie An cursed. “That damned Zhu Xu! He duped us?! That liar!”

Zhu Xu had specifically told them that Fu Jian’s army would besiege the city tomorrow, but just after the night’s second watch began, Fu Rong had launched an attack on the city with his two hundred thousand soldiers.[14]

“All’s fair in war,” Xie Xuan reminded him. “Everyone, let’s move! Chen-daren, I saw your protector! He just left the city heading north, but he wants you to come with us back to Jiankang! He said he’d be back to find you as soon as his business is done!”

“No! He just got back, so where does he think he’s going now? That bastard! That stupid bastard! I have a lot of things to say to him!”

Xie An saw that Chen Xing was about to cry. “You can’t go in any other direction right now. Only the southern road is safe—”

“I have Sui Xing! I’ll be safe anywhere I go!”

“The Qin troops have arrived!” came the shout.

Another soldier’s distant cry followed. “Attack!”

Dong! Dong! The bell atop the hill clanged, and the whole city held its breath. Suddenly, pots full of flammable oil were streaking across the horizon through the curtain of night—and then the city began to burn.

Inspiration struck Xie An. “Don’t let Chen-daren go! All of our lives depend on him!”

Chen Xing stared at him, wondering what the fuck he was talking about.

“Yes! Sui Xing!” said Wang Xizhi, apparently catching on. Chen Xing turned to stare at him too.

“Daoyun! Where’s Daoyun?!” Xie An yelled, and Xie Daoyun emerged, rushing over to a carriage.

“Let’s go!” she shouted. “Everyone, get in the carriage!”

With that, they all came together to corner Chen Xing, heave him into the carriage, and hop in after him. In the blink of an eye, their peaceful night had become a repeat of the night Xiangyang fell. Chen Xing stayed where he’d been put, sitting in the center of the carriage with a group of civil officials all around him, each holding onto a different part of his clothes. With Xie Daoyun driving the carriage and Huan Yi’s men escorting them, they fled Shouyang as fast as they could.

Because almost all of the city’s residents had been evacuated, Fu Rong was met with virtually no resistance when he marched into Shouyang.

He found no lanterns or fires lit inside the city. In fact, it was his side that suffered losses—many of them—thanks to Xie Xuan's well-laid traps.

After Chen Xing and the others left the city, they heard a sudden, distant explosion as the governor's residence went up in flames. After luring the enemy troops into the city, Chen Xing surmised, they must have set the residence on fire so that the soldiers would burn to death.

It was impossible to be totally sure whether it was Chen Xing's presence or Xie Daoyun's exceptional driving skills, but their escape was smoother than any of them could have imagined. The carriage didn't overturn, and it didn't get stuck in any ditches, and it certainly didn't encounter any Qin ambush. Soon they were nearly three miles away from the city. The autumn rain had just stopped, leaving the sides of the road muddy, but now that they were a safe distance away, the officials got out of the carriage. Dressed all in white, they knelt in the mud and each performed three bows in Shouyang's direction.

"Who are you paying respect to?" Chen Xing asked.

"The three officials who set the fire and took the Qin troops down with them," said Xie Daoyun. She got out of the carriage to pay her respects too, and Chen Xing joined her.

"Well, everyone, this is where we part," Huan Yi said. At his side, Xie Xuan nodded. "We all drank last night during Chen-xiansheng's banquet, so there's no need to say our goodbyes again."

Xie An, Wang Xizhi, and the group of civil officials sitting in the carriage nodded respectfully to the two of them. "Leave the court to us," said Xie An. He and the others still had an important task: to return to Jiankang to protect the emperor and mobilize the whole nation to face the next great war, which was likely to reach the capital city of Jiankang.

Chen Xing sat on the edge of the carriage, and when he saw the soldiers starting to leave, he jumped out.

"Chen Xing!"

"Tianchi!"

Chen Xing hopped up behind Huan Yi on his horse. "Let's go!" he said.

He turned around, the Heart Lamp glowing bright in his hand. Huan Yi nodded and urged his horse on, and together, they rode toward Luojian. Meanwhile, the Beifu Army, the Shouyang Army, and the conscripted civilian troops were all rushing to the Fei River from all directions. With Fu Jian's million troops coming south, the north bank of the Fei River was about the become the site of the greatest war of their time—and the largest war in all of history.

The south was the home of all Han people. Over the past few months, across its thousands of miles of rivers and mountains, farmers had stopped farming, laborers had stopped working, merchants had closed their shops, craftsmen had shut down production, scholars had abandoned their books, and roaming martial artists had rejoined society. Every single person with something to spare, everybody capable of picking up a sword, had gone to the Chaohu region, and the rest had used up all their wealth to provide assistance to the frontlines.

It was because this war wasn't just two countries vying for supremacy. If the Qin captured Jiankang, it would spell the end of the Han people. The Disaster of Yongjia was still a vivid bloodstain in all their minds. They knew this matter was a matter of life and death.

If Jiankang fell, the Han would face total annihilation.

Chapter 87

“I WISH TO OFFER YOU A DEAL. It is one that I am confident you will not be able to refuse.”

“Who are you, exactly?”

“Come. Everything you wish to know, you shall learn in Huanmo Palace.”

Standing on the north bank of the Fei River, Xiang Shu recalled the words Chiyou had spoken directly into his mind three months ago. There were flocks of crows all around him now, and, like a tiger watching its prey, they eyed the land west of Luojian covetously. Qin troops occupied the wide, open plain north of the river all the way to the horizon.

More than a million soldiers… Fu Jian had mobilized the strength of his entire country, vowing to vanquish the south to prove that there was nothing he could not bend to his will. In comparison, the stronghold on the south side of the river was a quiet, gloomy affair. Even now, at the last minute, the Jin troops were still rushing to build fortifications.

A crow flew over and landed downstream of Xiang Shu. In response, he took off his outer garments and jumped into the water. He was an excellent swimmer; back in his childhood, he had swum like a fish in the rivers and lakes of Chi Le Chuan. As the ice-cold water swept across his naked back, he recalled the scene from three months ago.

The moment they entered Yique, a buzzing veil of light covered everything.

“I’ve finally found it,” said Wang Ziye’s clear voice. “Sure enough, this place can only be accessed with the power of the dragon pearl.”

Caught off guard when Wang Ziye opened the gate, Xiang Shu found himself brought into a strange world. He pulled all the power of the Heart Lamp back into him, then dissipated it and let himself land on the ground. “This is your plan, Wang Ziye?” he asked in a low voice.

This place was similar, in a way, to the world inside the Yin Yang Mirror. There was a circular white jade platform covered with strange glowing symbols. A yin-yang symbol was embedded in the center, with each side marked out clearly. Beyond the platform lay a verdant landscape, partially obscured by mist; it could have come straight from a painting.

Wang Ziye bowed his head, peering through his lashes up at the platform and the sword-wielding figure that stood on it. “Don’t worry,” he said, tone indifferent. “Unless I deliberately cut off the magical artifact supporting this place, the flow of time here is stagnant. Let’s talk, Shulü Kong.”

Xiang Shu lowered his sword. “We are well past any chance to end this peacefully, Wang Ziye,” he said darkly.

Wang Ziye slowly descended to land on the yin side of the yin-yang symbol. Xiang Shu remained standing on the yang side, looking around.

“You needn’t be in a rush to break this array and leave,” Wang Ziye replied. “I will bring this crucial, final magical artifact with me when I leave, at which point you will have no trouble leaving this place.”

Xiang Shu said nothing. He watched Wang Ziye in silence.

“Ah,” Wang Ziye murmured, reminiscing. “It was eight years ago that I saw you in front of the tent in Chi Le Chuan. You gave me this same look back then…”

Fury rose in Xiang Shu. His father’s death, Che Luofeng’s death… This was the man who had caused so many partings!

“…That same gaze filled with suspicion. But I did not yet know, eight years ago, that you were the Dinghai Pearl. In hindsight, it’s strange that I was foolish enough to overlook such a thing.”

Xiang Shu’s mind went blank. He felt as if he had been struck by lightning. His hand began to tremble on his sword, and it would not stop. “What? You… What did you say?” Without conscious thought, he pulled out the pearl that they had snatched from Wang Ziye.

“That is the Azure Wave Pearl,” Wang Ziye said. “It is the dragon pearl left behind by the dragon that was your father’s companion, after the Xiang family—your mother’s family—suppressed it.”

Xiang Shu was speechless.

“Ah, you didn’t know that yet? Actually, it might not be accurate to call him your ‘father’ at all. Since you are transformed from the dragon’s inner core, however, you can think of the dragon energy Zhuyin left in your body as an imprint your father left on you.”

“You…” Scene after scene flashed before Xiang Shu’s eyes. His interactions with his parents throughout his childhood, his life on the plains, the day he learned how to shoot a bow on horseback… In just a few sentences, Wang Ziye had upended everything he knew about the world. At last he could no longer hold back his anger. “Bullshit!”

With a bellow of rage, he readied his sword once more and charged. Somehow, though, Wang Ziye disappeared from the yin side of the yin-yang symbol and reappeared on the yang side, swapping their positions. The sudden change left Xiang Shu wrong-footed. He frowned deeply and tried to call upon the might of Chen Xing’s Heart Lamp so that he could end Wang Ziye once and for all.

“This is dragon energy,” Wang Ziye said. “Speaking of which… Do you remember what I said when we last met, by Lake Hong? I know everything you wish to know. That leftover dragon power coursing through your meridians”—here he smiled—“often makes you feel restless. There’s a force inside your body that wants to destroy everything and wreak havoc, isn’t there? It made you the best in the world, yet it traps you and causes you suffering. When you’re angry, you can’t hold back, even for the sake of the people closest to you.”

Xiang Shu was silent as he slowly calmed himself.

Wang Ziye studied him for a moment. “I’ve spent all these years searching high and low for the Dinghai Pearl,” he said. “All this time, and I never realized that the world’s most precious artifact, the one with the tremendous power to alter causality, had been reborn…as a human being.”

Xiang Shu looked around, his gaze confused and distant.

“Let’s make a deal, Shulü Kong.”

Now, in the Fei River.

Under the cover of night, Xiang Shu swam after the crow as it flew, neither too fast nor too slow, just over the water's surface. He stopped when he came upon a huge boulder in the center of the river, and the crow landed on it. Xiang Shu ducked below the surface; looking down into the swift waters below, he could see the pitch-black entrance of a cavern. Here, the Fei River split, and that entrance led underground.

It was underwater all along. No wonder I couldn't find it, Xiang Shu thought. He resurfaced and took a deep breath before diving into that dark underground stream. Something glimmered at the other end. It looked a lot like the light that had flashed across all of Yique that day.

Wang Ziye looked around at their surroundings too, thinking about the past. "I need you to do me a favor. If we start from the beginning, it has been three centuries since I last came here. Your mother and Zhang Liu intended to stay in this place and summon the Endless Tides in order to travel back to the distant past. It was fortunate that I stopped them. But let's cut to the chase." His tone became serious. "I can make sure you get whatever you want. You just need to do me a favor."

Xiang Shu looked at him.

"Send me back to three thousand years ago. Let me change my own destiny with my own hands. I want to become the new Demon God. If you cooperate, I will teach you how to harness the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth that resides in your body, and from then on…"

Xiang Shu set his sword aside. He looked at Wang Ziye skeptically, and slowly moved toward him.

Wang Ziye smiled. "Those you allow to live shall live, and those you wish to die shall die. The entire world's spiritual qi resides in your body, and even the so-called Demon God, the Deity of War, Chiyou, will be no match for you. Of course, since you're a just and merciful person, I don't believe you'll kill people at random. If you wish to lengthen the already-short lifespan of that little friend of yours, though, you should not refuse this offer."

"And then what?" said Xiang Shu.

“And then you shall become a god in this mortal world.” Wang Ziye looked up at Xiang Shu, who was half a head taller than him. “You will have all the time on this earth, and you will live a life without death.”

Xiang Shu studied Wang Ziye. Then his left hand shot out, lightning fast, to wrap around Wang Ziye’s throat and silence his dangerous words.

A beam of black light shot from Wang Ziye’s eyes, and there was a loud rumble as the light engulfed both of them. Xiang Shu howled when the black shock wave hit him, but he refused to let go, and his hand remained wrapped tightly around Wang Ziye’s throat. He clenched his fingers swiftly, intending to snap Wang Ziye’s neck, but Wang Ziye opened his folding fan and gestured with it.

BOOM! The entire platform began to crumble, and as pieces fell away, the two of them were swallowed up by the glowing blue earth vein below. One by one, the characters on the platform shot out, then sank into the ground.

Xiang Shu’s left hand was still a vise around Wang Ziye’s throat. With his right, he snatched the folding fan from Wang Ziye. “Your terms aren’t bad,” he said, in a voice like ice. “But what I want is your life, so that I can avenge my father and my anda!”

He’d been engulfed by that explosion of resentment, but his voice resounded with such menacing, malicious intent, as if a dragon had unleashed an earth-shattering threat upon all mortals, that even the heavens themselves trembled before him—the illusory realm collapsed and shattered.

It had taken all of Wang Ziye’s remaining strength and resentment to go head-to-head with Xiang Shu’s dragon might, and now he went flying backward. Xiang Shu lifted his heavy sword with one hand, and as the platform beneath his feet fell, he jumped forward with everything he had and swung his sword down at Wang Ziye.

The Fei River, in the dark of night.

After a few moments, the surroundings suddenly grew bright. Xiang Shu climbed out of the water and smoothed his wet hair back as he studied the earth veins that crept along the cavern walls. They reached into the

depths of the secret passage ahead like the intertwined roots of a massive tree. As he walked along, moving ever deeper, the red glow of veins blazed even brighter. When he reached the mouth of the hundred-foot-high karst cave, he found it filled with blazing, bloodred earth veins. They looked like blood vessels leading to the huge heart dangling in the middle of the cave. The heart itself was giving off black qi, and as it pulsed, the red light of the veins brightened and dimmed, drenching the chamber in its bloody glow.

“You’ve come, Dinghai Pearl.” Chiyou’s voice echoed in Xiang Shu’s mind.

Red light shone from the space between Xiang Shu’s eyebrows. “As promised.”

“We sense the breath of the Dragon God in your body.”

For a moment, Xiang Shu didn’t speak further, and Huanmo Palace fell silent. There was a stranger standing underneath the heart. “Wang Ziye?” Xiang Shu asked quietly. “You’re still alive?”

Wang Ziye hesitated.

“Disregard him,” Chiyou said. “He is all but useless now that you’ve removed one of his immortal souls.” Xiang Shu raised an eyebrow at Wang Ziye, and Chiyou went on, “Shi Hai coveted my power to slaughter armies and wanted your aid in stealing my vessel. It is fortunate you did not fall for his lies.”

Wang Ziye shrank back behind the heart, quivering uncontrollably.

“He and I did not agree to any terms,” Xiang Shu told Chiyou. “But how do you know all of this?”

“I understand humanity better than anyone does. Before I woke him, he struggled bitterly under the ground, though he was a mere mortal.”

Xiang Shu approached the enormous heart. Wang Ziye backed away further.

“Is that what Acalanatha gave to you mortals? The Acala Blade?” Chiyou asked.

Xiang Shu turned his head back to glance at the sword on his back. He did not respond.

“It is Xuanyuan’s sword,” said Chiyou. “It was forged from the six primordial sources of light—sunlight, moonbeam, starlight, lightning, flame, and luster of bone—using bronze mined from Shou Mountain. You can try to kill me with it, as that was the reason the sword was forged, but you will find it unable to end me. That I am here speaking to you is proof that while Acalanatha and Xuanyuan had the will to destroy me, they had not the strength. That is because there is a seventh kind of light beyond the six primordial sources used to forge that blade—the light of the heart.

“If you wish to truly destroy me, you must first take that exorcist’s life—then take his soul and the Heart Lamp and fuse them into this sword. That is your true destiny, the true burden you shoulder. To complete the forging of this sword, you must kill your beloved with your own hands. Only then can you succeed.”

“But then Chen Xing will have to die,” Xiang Shu said.

An odd burst of laughter came from Chiyou’s heart. “Correct. Obviously, you can choose to ignore my words and set aside your destiny. If you do so, then a year from now, when Sui Xing returns to the heavens, the Heart Lamp will be extinguished. Few things in life go as one wishes they might; that fact is what gives rise to obsession. For as long as the world continues to turn, obsession and denial will reside in human hearts. Now, I offer you another choice. Become my new vessel. Share your body with me. If your three immortal souls are strong enough to devour mine, I will become you. If you succumb to my power, however, you will become me.”

Xiang Shu studied the heart carefully. “Chiyou, are you certain you’re willing to take such a great risk simply to gain a vessel?”

“Anything is worth it if I have a chance to be reborn. That’s true even if you were to become the dominant personality. Once you are aware of my history, you will make the same choice I did. Everyone knows Yan and Huang were the ancestors of all humans, but nobody knows that I am also an ancestor to you humans. After the Battle of Banquan, my blood seeped into the Divine Land; for millennia, the water mortals drank, the medicines they took, the food they ate, even the essence of the world itself—these things all contained my essence and my blood. I have long since become part of the Divine Land itself. All manner of beasts, all kinds of plants,

everything that exists in this world contains a piece of my will! Xuanyuan may have killed me, but he also helped me become complete!

“No matter who wins or loses in the end, I promise to change causality for you. I will return to twenty years ago and prevent Sui Xing from entering his natal chart at all. As for the companions you wish to save, I will remove the resentment from their bodies and return them to you.”

“How can you guarantee you won’t go back on your word?” Xiang Shu asked.

“I am a god of this world,” Chiyou replied solemnly, “and gods never go back on their words. In my eyes, all mortals are mere ants, and all living beings are my descendants. I understand their yearning for life, their fear of death; I understand their denial of their circumstances and their resentment. I understand better than any of you the pain of those feelings. Once you have become me, or have left the last sliver of yourself in my body, you will come to understand that as well. Now, come. Fu Jian is about to start a war, and resentment is running wild. The Dinghai Pearl is almost ready to be refined. Once you hand over your artifacts, we can begin to prepare the Ten Thousand Spirits Array.”

Once again, Xiang Shu remained silent.

Eventually, Chiyou spoke again. “I have no interest whatsoever in this current era of yours. Once the Ten Thousand Spirits Array has been completed and I am finished with the tasks promised to you, I will return to Banquan three thousand years ago. That is where my battlefield lies. What still worries you, Dinghai Pearl? Becoming one with me—becoming the Divine Land’s sole eternal god—is the best option for you.”

At last, Xiang Shu untied the bundle he had brought. The six magical artifacts—the Azure Wave Pearl, the Zheng Drum, the Soulfall Bell, the White Tiger Banner, the Zouyu Banner, and the Celestial Net Fan—all shimmered with light as they flew in the direction of the huge heart.

“The Celestial Net Fan shall go to Wang Ziye, as it did before,” Chiyou said. “Wang Ziye, you will be in charge of Luoyang, the Tianquan Star. The seven mortal forms are complete if we add the Saber of Harmony and Life and the Sky-Rending Claws. Once the resentment in the human realm is at its peak, activate the Ten Thousand Spirits Array and create my body.”

Wang Ziye stared at the Soulfall Bell, which glimmered faintly with the light of the souls trapped within.

The south bank of the Fei River, just after midnight.

Huan Yi and Xie Xuan galloped at full speed to meet up with Xie Yan outside the camp. When they arrived, Chen Xing quickly dismounted. “Where is Xiang Shu?” he asked. “Has anyone seen Xiang Shu?”

“Lord Martial God passed through the camp earlier,” Xie Yan said. “I don’t know if he’s crossed the river, but if he has, he must have gone to the Qin army’s side.”

This only made Chen Xing more worried. “Nobody followed him?”

Xie Yan shrugged and glanced questioningly at Huan Yi. Huan Yi didn’t know what to do either. They had a national disaster on their hands and no bodies to spare, so Chen Xing was going to have to find his missing protector on his own.

“Exorcist,” Huan Yi said, “please take a moment to rest. Feel free to use the commander-in-chief’s tent. Forgive me, I can’t keep you company; I must lend my counsel to the battle.”

“Go do what you need to do,” Chen Xing said.

“Should we bring Chen-xiansheng to the battle?” Xie Xuan whispered to Huan Yi. He had heard that Sui Xing’s protection turned Chen Xing’s misfortune into good luck; he’d brought him to the Fei River because he secretly hoped some of that luck would rub off.

Huan Yi frowned. “What message would that send? Besides, Sui Xing’s blessing only falls upon him. Are you saying that if we can’t beat them, we should throw him out there so he can fall on someone and crush them to death?”

“I heard that!” Chen Xing said indignantly from a little way off. “Wait until I find Xiang Shu, then I’ll teach you all a lesson!”

What if we made him the commander-in-chief? Xie Xuan thought. *If we let him lead the Beifu Army’s charge, we might actually be able to throw the Qin army into chaos or even cause a stampede. Those soldiers trampling their own people to death would be a great boon for the Jin.*

What does mass chaos spread over a million people look like? Maybe we'd even end up taking out Fu Jian that way.

But this was all wishful thinking. Huan Yi had already set up an extensive defensive perimeter and sent scouts to monitor the situation. Xie Xuan refocused his attention and headed swiftly to the commanders' tent to attend the meeting. Chen Xing, meanwhile, climbed one of the watchtowers and surveyed the situation from above, looking out blankly across the darkened plains.

Where was Xiang Shu? Where had he gone? Chen Xing wasn't sure why, but he felt an ominous sense of foreboding. He activated the Heart Lamp and shone it into the dark night, but there was no responding glimmer from Xiang Shu. He pressed one hand to his chest and once again lit the Heart Lamp, but Xiang Shu remained silent.

"I'll go ask around in the Qin camp," Chen Xing murmured to himself. He was growing more and more concerned about Xiang Shu. It was as if, in leaving Shouyang, Xiang Shu had cut off the connection they had developed between them over the past three years. Before, even when Xiang Shu wasn't by his side, Chen Xing could still always feel the connection linking them. Now, there was nothing.

Morning dawned, and Chen Xing rode along the southern bank of the Fei River. It wasn't his first circuit; he'd made several already. The far side of the river was a vast expanse of white. He took his horse to higher ground this time and saw the Qin troops on the other side, vast as an ocean, stretching all the way to the horizon.

"Oh my god," he gasped. "So many?! Why are there so many people here?!" By contrast, the ten thousand soldiers of the Beifu Army, lined up on the plains on the south bank, comprised only a handful of square formations.

"I can't tell if they want to fight on the northern or southern bank," a voice said from behind Chen Xing. "You can't possibly want to charge at an army of more than a million people, can you?"

Chen Xing whipped around when he heard the familiar, rich voice. A man dressed in a black martial robe was behind him, astride a horse and

carrying a longsword on his back. Chen Xing’s eyes grew wide. “Murong Chong?”

Chapter 88

MURONG CHONG FROWNED. “Keep your voice down! Do you want to alert the entire Jin army?” Chen Xing made to dismount, but Murong Chong stopped him. “Don’t. It’s easier to move from here.”

Fine, Chen Xing thought sullenly, *whatever you say*.

They exchanged a brief glance. “Where is the Great Chanyu?” Murong Chong asked.

Chen Xing shrugged. It was clear that Murong Chong had come to find Xiang Shu.

They exchanged information, and Murong Chong explained that after he left Luoyang, his Silver Cavalry had been absorbed into Fu Jian’s army. Thus began his escape, a long journey that started with him heading back to the Xianbei mountains to try to persuade the Ancient Chi Le Covenant to assist him. He’d hoped to convince Shi Mokun to strike Fu Jian’s rear guard during his southern campaign, but the new Great Chanyu had refused. Of course, King Sosurim was no help either. Murong Chong had then tried to contact Murong Chui, but before he could even meet with his uncle, Murong Chong had been betrayed and nearly assassinated. His journey had been full of ups and downs.

“And you?” he asked finally.

“I was in a coma for three months,” Chen Xing said succinctly. Murong Chong just looked at him. Chen Xing looked back. “So…what are you here for?”

“I want to sneak in and assassinate Fu Jian while the Qin and Jin armies are fighting.”

“What? Have you given up on living?”

“No. The only purpose in me living is to do this.” Murong Chong looked away, his eyes betraying his loneliness. “I don’t know where my sister’s body is. If you find her”—he turned his horse around to leave —“help me cremate her. I don’t know even know where to look.”

“Wait!” Chen Xing yelled. “Come with me.”

He led Murong Chong around to the rear of the Jin army, where the Beifu Army was beginning to retreat. Xie An, clearly well-trained, was commanding the orderly retreat of a hundred thousand soldiers without the slightest hint of trouble.

Chen Xing stopped a military captain. “What’s going on?”

“General Xie Xuan has agreed to Fu Jian’s request,” the captain replied. “The entire army is retreating three miles to allow the Qin army to cross the river, and then a battle will decide the victor.”

Chen Xing and Murong Chong halted their horses, watching from the southern side of the river. “Truly arrogant,” muttered Murong Chong. “If they’re attacked during the crossing, they’ll be at a serious disadvantage.”

“It’s just like him,” Chen Xing said.

Fu Jian stood on horseback by the riverbank, clad in imperial armor with his emperor’s sword at his waist.

“Your Majesty,” Fu Rong said, “we cannot trust the Jin. If we fail to cross the river—”

“Look at the army behind you,” Fu Jian interrupted coldly. “Now look at this river.”

Silence.

“With an army this size, if I ordered all my men to strike the Yangtze with their horsewhips, they would stop the river’s flow!” Fu Jian’s voice was commanding. “Cross the river!”

In the same moment that the Qin army began to cross the river, a violent thunderclap rang out from the sky. A dark wind whipped up out of nowhere to sweep across the plains of Fei River. The river’s surface grew suddenly turbulent, and a faint black mist rose from the water and surged toward both banks.

Clouds rolled ominously across the sky, obscuring the scorching sun. The light faded, and the commanders of the Jin army—Xie Xuan, Huan Yi,

and Xie Yan—looked up in unison.

“It’s going to rain,” said Murong Chong. “Rain will make the battle even harder.”

“No,” Chen Xing murmured. “It’s not rain. This is resentment… Where is it coming from?”

Inside Huanmo Palace.

“The Acala Blade is no longer useful to you,” Chiyou said. “Pass it to me.”

Xiang Shu sat cross-legged on the altar, the Acala Blade resting across his knees. “Why the hurry?” he asked in a low voice. “This body will eventually be yours. Why fear a mere sword?”

When Chiyou spoke again, there was a sneer in his voice. “You’re just afraid of me; afraid I won’t keep my promise. Soon you will see: When my power is restored, I will become a god who transcends the heavens and earth! Wang Ziye! Activate the Ten Thousand Spirits Array!”

Xiang Shu opened his eyes and looked at Wang Ziye then, and Wang Ziye, standing in front of the altar, took a small, wary step back.

“Activate…the Ten Thousand Spirits Array,” Wang Ziye echoed. “My lord, the resentment is still insufficient. Last time, we used the resentment left in the Celestial Net Fan to forcibly refine the Azure Wave Pearl and the other—”

“It will be replenished,” Chiyou said. “Begin.”

Wang Ziye released countless tendrils of black resentment. They coiled around him, and he shot toward the earth veins and used them to fly away.

Suddenly, a flood of red light erupted from the heart. Resentment and Demon God’s Blood spread rapidly through the earth veins, extending toward the north and south ends of the Divine Land.

Yaoguang,[15] the far north, among the peaks of Carosha.

Xiao Shan’s scarf fluttered wildly in the storm, but his grip on the Sky-Rending Claws remained firm. The lingering resentment over the northern lands swirled into two violent vortexes, which were then drawn into the metal talons.

With one hand pointing to the heavens and the other to the earth, he gathered the remnants of resentment from the last great battle and condensed them into a towering pillar of darkness that shot from the ground into the sky.

Kaiyang,[16] Karakorum.

Sensing the disturbance, the stone tower trembled, and the sacred artifacts sealed within took up an ominous hum. The towering ghost king didn’t so much as glance at the tower as he strode past it, making his way to the royal palace. The relocated people of the Chi Le Covenant cried out in alarm and fired volley after volley of arrows. At the palace gates, Shi Mokun stood at the head of his Tiele warriors, his voice thundering as he shouted to them in the Tiele tongue.

The ghost king raised a hand and summoned the Soulfall Bell, its surface wreathed in tendrils of dark mist. A single resounding toll rang out, and in an instant, one immortal soul was drawn from every body in Karakorum. As the immortal souls emerged, they transformed into flitting butterflies and were absorbed into the bell.

The ghost king bowed slightly, then, in one swift motion, drew his sword and vanished in a streak of black light. Though no one saw it happen, he had severed Shi Mokun’s head and sent it flying with a single strike.

Silence fell over Karakorum as the ghost king stepped into the royal palace and lifted the Soulfall Bell toward the heavens. Then there came a deafening sound from the top of the Xiongnu king’s palace, and its dome was pierced by a black beam of light.

Yuheng,[17] the summit of the Yin Mountains, at the site of the stone pillar.

The giant decaying wolf began to transform in the air, gradually becoming a young man with a sword scar across his brow. In his left hand, he held the White Tiger Banner, and he slowly stroked it with his right. Black light erupted from his body and shot toward the sky.

Tianquan,[18] Luoyang.

Wang Ziye appeared in front of the Longmen Mountains and raised the Celestial Net Fan. Resentment spread like a dark cloud, billowing outward and solidifying into a column of black light that connected the heavens above and the earth veins below.

Tianji,[19] Kuaiji.

At the top of the city gate, Feng Qianjun stood holding the Sabers of Harmony and Life in each hand. He brought them together in front of him, and out shot two black beams that joined to connect heaven and earth.

Tianxuan,[20] Longzhong Mountain.

Sima Wei shook open the Zouyu Banner. Black light shot out to meet the sky and the ground alike.

Chang’an.

With a flick of her sleeves, Princess Qinghe flew into the sky, holding the Azure Wave Pearl. The people of Chang’an were shocked and alarmed.

“Monster!” they cried, fleeing like startled birds. They were terrified of a repeat of the disaster two years ago. “The monster has come again!”

Yuwen Xin, leading the few remaining imperial guards, hastily shot arrows into the sky. “Wh-who is this?!”

Princess Qinghe raised the Azure Wave Pearl and let out a cold laugh. Resentment poured from the pearl, a flood of it, a tidal wave. It decimated Chang’an’s imperial palace and then concentrated at the palace’s center.

There, it smashed up through the roof of Taichu Palace and into the sky, and down into the earth veins in the ground below.

A visible change swept across the heavens and earth. The Fei River was only part of it. Seven massive pillars of light rose from the ground to meet the sky, obstructing the great wheel of time, which had been circling the world for millennia. The primal essence of the Divine Land began to flow into these pillars, countless specks of light assimilated by the resentment.

A violent storm surged around the pillars, and the world grew darker and darker until it was like staring into a bottomless pit. That darkness flowed rapidly through the earth veins, circulating from the seven points of the Ten Thousand Spirits Array into Chiyou's heart.

The heart turned pitch-black, and the blood qi began to spread.

Jiankang.

Sima Yao was conducting a sky ritual when the celestial phenomenon occurred. His civil and military officials hurried outside, Xie An at their head, to observe the sky as it was obscured by looming clouds.

Xie An frowned. "What's going on?"

"Could something have happened at the Fei River?" Wang Xizhi muttered.

"This battle is a matter of life and death," Sima Yao said in an imperious voice. "If you're all so worried, then join me in praying."

Meanwhile, on the lightless battlefield, Fu Jian's army was crossing the river. The raging storm kicked up sand and stones on both banks, and the black qi in the river grew stronger and stronger. The soldiers began to murmur to each other.

"Cross the river!" shouted a messenger from the rear command. "Hurry up and cross!"

On the south bank, Huan Yi called out, “The wind is too strong! How are we supposed to fight in this?”

“Start the battle!” Xie Xuan replied decisively.

In one short moment, the three commanders reached a consensus. This was their only opportunity—fight or die!

A drum signaled the charge with three heavy beats that reverberated through the heavens and earth. The fierce wind blocked out the sun, and all the resentment in the world seemed to coalesce into a storm at the rear of the Qin army. The hundreds of thousands of soldiers crossing the river on horseback found themselves at the forefront of the oncoming tempest. The demonic wind that surged from the north bank made it impossible to see what lay ahead.

At the rear ranks of the Jin army, Chen Xing quickly discerned the direction of the flow of resentment. “It’s coming from the opposite bank! Go over with the others!”

They were still on horseback, and Murong Chong reached over to seize Chen Xing’s collar. “Don’t throw your life away,” he whispered in Chen Xing’s ear. “You’re not like me. You have the Great Chanyu; you don’t have to die. Don’t go over there.” Then he released Chen Xing. “I’m leaving now. Perhaps we’ll meet again in the next life—if there is one.”

The drum’s third beat rang out. Someone yelled, “Kill them!”

Brandishing long spears, the Jin army charged into the Fei River. Arrows fell like rain, and the shaking of the earth beneath their feet drowned out all other sounds. Murong Chong spurred his horse, drew his sword, and plunged into the raging depths of the Jin army’s desperate battle.

Chen Xing stared blankly at the scene unfolding before him. Blood stained the Fei River red, and the sky and earth were shrouded in darkness. Resentment surged across the Divine Land, toppling trees, whipping up monstrous waves in the river, and sending shields flying.

The sight was eerie; bizarre. “Chiyou,” Chen Xing muttered, “where are you?”

Underground, Huanmo Palace.

The primal force of the earth veins, stained an inky black by resentment, poured ceaselessly into the immense demon heart.

“I’m going to start refining you now, Dinghai Pearl,” came Chiyou’s voice. The black qi emanating from his heart thickened and swirled around Xiang Shu until dark flames erupted from Xiang Shu’s body. “Use all your willpower to resist… Give it everything you have, whether with the dragon’s power or the Heart Lamp’s. In this moment, I am the heavens, I am the Dao… I see you with that sword in your hand. I know you want to catch me off guard and kill me, but once the soul transfer begins, you will have no strength left with which to fight.”

Xiang Shu was still seated on the altar with his eyes closed. When he heard these words, he opened his eyes, but it was too late—Chiyou’s divine soul pierced his own human one. Faster than Xiang Shu could think, the tendrils of resentment penetrated deep into his mind. It was all he could do to keep a tight grip on his sword. A flash of light flickered in his heart, desperately guarding the last of his willpower.

Chen Xing sensed it at once. “Xiang Shu?”

He couldn’t even hear his own voice—it was drowned out by the sounds of slaughter all around him—but Xiang Shu must have, because the light from the Heart Lamp flickered again in the distance.

“Xiang Shu!” he roared. “What are you doing?! Why aren’t you waiting for me?!”

He spurred his horse down the hill toward the river of corpses. The Jin army had met fierce resistance from the Qin when they entered the river. Xie Xuan had thrown all available forces into the fray, knowing that there were only two ways this battle could end: in victory, or in death.

“Chen Xing!” Huan Yi shouted, noticing him charging toward the front lines. “Don’t go! Are you insane?!” The soldiers on both sides were blinded by rage. Like a demon, the Fei River was devouring them all.

There was a tremendous, distant rumble, and Chen Xing stopped his horse on the southern bank. Far away, surrounded by swirling resentment,

the earth cracked open and a massive altar rose into the air. Huanmo Palace had emerged.

The earth veins were pitch-black now, still feeding the heart on the altar. Chiyou's voice rang out. "Fight. Fight until the last moment. This is your destiny." Resentment devoured the Qin army, robbing the soldiers of all reason. They attacked uncontrollably. "Nothing else matters," said Chiyou, his voice booming across heaven and earth. "Kill the exorcist."

Under the surging waves of resentment, a million Qin soldiers flung themselves forward, crashing toward the Fei River's southern bank. Chen Xing watched, taking in the onslaught. The Jin army's front lines couldn't hold; soldiers scattered to the wings to evade the brunt of the attack. The Qin army's charge was like a tsunami headed straight for him, leveling everything in its path.

That was when a soft light emanated from Chen Xing's Heart Lamp. His entire body glowed with it. "Xiang Shu, I'm coming," he whispered. Then he urged his warhorse forward, riding alone against the oncoming tide of the Qin forces, defying the flow and heading upstream.

The Heart Lamp's light, a beacon in the darkness, streaked across the earth like a meteor. It cut a path through the battlefield, through the million soldiers and the surging torrent of resentment, heading straight for the enemy's rear lines.

"Xing-er." Xiang Shu's voice echoed in Chen Xing's ear. Chen Xing's eyes widened. Under the Heart Lamp's radiance, charging Qin soldiers trampled each other and fell. "Go back."

"What are you trying to do?" begged Chen Xing.

"Do you remember the promise you made to me?"

"Xiang Shu!" Chen Xing snarled. "You bastard! Are you trying to kill Chiyou by yourself?!"

Chiyou's voice erupted in a thunderous laugh. "You'll meet each other very soon."

Within the black flames, Xiang Shu's body burned. His skin began to peel away. Finally, the Dinghai Pearl appeared, flickering with the last

glimmer of light inside Xiang Shu's chest. It was a treasure wrapped in resentment; within it a golden ring appeared, slowly turning inside the pearl, stirring the earth veins and their wheel of time.

"Watch," Chiyou thundered. "With the world as the furnace and the ten thousand spirits as the flames, my eternal masterpiece is about to be born."

Resentment invaded the Dinghai Pearl. When the pearl itself turned an inky black, the resentment crept like vines toward the ring. Xiang Shu's eyes were screwed shut.

"Xing-er?" he said again, his voice echoing in Chen Xing's mind. His right hand, cracked and bleeding in the flames, remained tightly clenched around the hilt of the Acala Blade.

Chen Xing did not answer. He pressed forward, driving his horse as fast as he could. Then, abruptly, he saw a flash of white light ahead, and memories flashed unbidden through his mind.

In Xiangyang's dungeon, a beam of light shattered the bottomless darkness. Xiang Shu stared blankly at Chen Xing. In the haze around him, where nothing was clear, Chen Xing's face in the light, his arms wrapped tightly around Xiang Shu, were the only things that seemed real.

Then came more fleeting fragments:

On Longzhong Mountain, Xiang Shu scolded Chen Xing impatiently, but Chen Xing just smiled at him and pulled him close to whisper an explanation.

In the streets of Chang'an, Xiang Shu watched, bemused, as Chen Xing offered earnest, somber prayers.

Inside the imperial palace, Chen Xing slept groggily with his arms wrapped around Xiang Shu where he stood at the bedside.

Under the moonlight in Chi Le Chuan, Xiang Shu turned around, and Chen Xing snuck a glance at him…

In the present, on the platform, there was almost nothing left of Xiang Shu but his soul. The rest of him was fading, becoming transparent. The black qi from the heart seeped into his organs and his soul. Butterflies—glowing memories—fluttered out of his body and flew in all directions.

Just before the Dinghai Pearl could fall entirely into darkness, though, consumed by black qi, sparks flew from the rotating ring at its core, and a tiny burst of light flared up like a small flame.

“Xing-er,” Xiang Shu said softly, “promise me you’ll live well.”

“I won’t, I won’t!” Chen Xing yelled, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I won’t promise that! Don’t even think about it! *Exorcise!*”

He charged through the million enemy soldiers like a shooting star, carving a shining trail through the darkness. He was closing in on the altar’s high platform.

Chiyou cackled wildly. “A fleeting spark. You really think that can oppose my divine power?” he asked. In the next moment, he overtook Xiang Shu’s body completely.

He lifted the sword in Xiang Shu’s left hand and brushed the fingers of his right hand along the blade. As he touched them, each of the nine characters was extinguished, then erupted in black flames. He raised the Acala Blade and calmly pointed it at Chen Xing.

Chen Xing lunged, reaching for Xiang Shu, and the heavy sword pierced his chest.

It skewered him, forcing him back. He was so close to Xiang Shu, less than a foot away, but he couldn’t reach him. He held out one glowing hand and stared blankly at Xiang Shu’s handsome face, illuminated by the Heart Lamp’s light. Blood began to pour from his mouth.

Xiang Shu smiled at Chen Xing. When he spoke, his voice had merged with Chiyou’s. “That light will be extinguished along with your life, and the spark will never burn again…”

Suddenly, clarity returned to Xiang Shu’s eyes. His smile grew tender.

“I knew it,” he said. This time, the voice was his alone. “You can’t let go of me. I knew you would come.”

Chen Xing gasped. “I… This time, it’s not for…anything else,” he said weakly. “It’s just…for you…”

“Give me the Heart Lamp,” Xiang Shu said gently, and all at once the light from Chen Xing’s body flowed into the Acala Blade. With a brilliant

flash, the heavy sword transformed into an arrow, with its head pointed at Xiang Shu.

Xiang Shu flipped his hand over, gripped the arrow, and drove it into his own chest.

There was a *ding* as the glowing arrowhead struck the blackened Dinghai Pearl, and then the world fell silent around them. The spark inside the Dinghai Pearl reacted with a sudden flare of blinding light. It radiated outward, and the golden ring began to shine once more. A streak of light shot out and hit the golden arrow with a loud crackling sound.

Cracks appeared and spread rapidly on the Dinghai Pearl. The demonic heart let out a furious roar.

“Xiang Shu?” Chen Xing murmured, stunned.

The Dinghai Pearl shattered, and out burst a whirlwind of spiritual qi. It swept across the world around them, engulfing everything in its path. Outside the radius of the storm, mountains, rivers, the earth, trees, mortals, and weapons were all blown to pieces.

The Revival of All Magic was beginning.

Xiang Shu reached out and pulled Chen Xing in by the wrist until he was holding him tightly in his arms. The roar of a dragon echoed around them, but they were safe in the eye of the storm. Xiang Shu moved them both until he was sitting on the altar, half reclining like an indifferent, demon-slaying Martial God, with Chen Xing cradled in his arms. His focus was entirely on the red string wrapped around Chen Xing’s hand.

“This is the last bit of time we have together,” Xiang Shu whispered. “I have something to tell you, Xing-er.”

“You…” Chen Xing murmured. “Dinghai Pearl… You… Why… You’re…” The Acala Blade had done extensive damage. As he spoke, more blood poured from his mouth, and his vision grew increasingly blurry.

Xiang Shu lowered his head and pressed his lips to Chen Xing’s forehead. Suddenly, fragments of starlight erupted from Chen Xing’s body. The lights spun and flew upward, only to linger there, swirling around the pair of them as if reluctant to leave. Xiang Shu looked up at the sky and murmured an incantation, and the spiritual whirlwind unleashed by the

Dinghai Pearl spread. Its winds and golden light surrounded the altar like the ceaseless tides of an eternal ocean.

Chiyou's enormous, shapeless form materialized on the altar with them as his demonic soul struggled desperately against the whirlwind spiritual energy, attempting to reclaim control of Xiang Shu's body. "Utterly foolish!" he roared.

As Xiang Shu finished reciting the incantation, new glowing characters appeared in the air around him and gathered to form an ancient tidal formation. The yin-yang symbol beneath the altar began to spin.

"What are you trying to do?!" Chiyou demanded, a hint of fear creeping into his voice.

Xiang Shu ignored him, looking down at Chen Xing in his arms. "Sui Xing has already left you," he told him. "You will live for a long, long time, and eventually, you'll find a Protector Martial God who will be your companion for life."

The light in Chen Xing's eyes was fading. Xiang Shu reached into his own ethereal chest and grasped the Tide Ring. It hovered in his transparent hand and began again to spin—and Chiyou let out a furious roar as he was swept away by an irresistible vortex.

The earth veins reversed.

Chen Xing finally closed his eyes, and everything went black.

In the dark.

"Hey," said a young voice.

Chen Xing opened his eyes to find himself standing in total darkness. "Where am I?" he asked. "Am I dead? Where's Xiang Shu?"

There was a young man in front of him whose body radiated a faint light. It wasn't the light of the Heart Lamp, though—more like the soft glow of starlight.

"What should I say now?" the boy asked, scratching his head. He looked about the same age as Chen Xing. "It's time for me to say goodbye."

"Who are you?" Chen Xing glanced around, then took a closer look at the boy and had a realization. "You're Sui Xing! You're the one who's been talking to me!"

The boy smiled. He was strikingly handsome, with a bold air to his features that was quite different from Chen Xing's own elegance. "Yeah, I'm born of Qilin, the fourth life star of the heavens," he said. "Bo, Zhong, Shu, Ji. They call me Xiao-Ji."[21]

"I'm going to die," Chen Xing said. "So I guess you'll be leaving too."

"Uh…well…that's a bit complicated," said Xiao-Ji. "I'm supposed to have another year left, but the Dinghai Pearl stole it from me. So…what should we do now?"

"Wait, I remember now. Xiang Shu… He's the Dinghai Pearl?"

Xiao-Ji didn't answer, just eyed Chen Xing speculatively.

“What about Chiyou?” asked Chen Xing. “Is he dead?”

“You could say he’s dead, but you could also say he’s not,” said Xiao-Ji. When Chen Xing gave him a bewildered look, he smiled. “I really don’t want to leave you. You’re a very brave mortal.”

Chen Xing felt suddenly like he might cry, but in his soul form, no tears came. “Thank you for looking after me for all this time, Xiao-Ji.”

“You won’t be so lucky in the future. You’ll need to take care of yourself. Oh! I just remembered—there’s one more artifact!”

“Well, it’s not like I’ll remember it in the next life.”

“You should go.”

A flash of light appeared in front of Chen Xing. “Wait!” he protested. “I still have questions!”

“You’ll be fine,” Xiao-Ji assured him, and vanished from his sight.

In the rift in time.

The colossal wheel of time, which had rotated for millennia, was moving in reverse. Meteors, millions of them, erupted from the heaven veins and shot toward the ground—and the earth itself rose up to meet them, giving birth to a billion spiritual bodies that flew up to the heavens. These bodies—this spiritual qi—were the missing link between the heaven and earth veins. Mountains moved; the sun rose in the west and set in the east; day and night cycled at a rapid pace. There was nothing stronger than the power of fate.

The instant the Dinghai Pearl shattered and the spiritual qi burst out, the amber pendant tied to Chen Xing’s waist came loose and fell. The amber burned in the violent storm, the red string snapped, and the phoenix’s shimmering ashes scattered into the air.

In the eye of the storm, the rotating Tide Ring came to a halt, and the characters of the ancient tidal array dispersed and vanished. Xiang Shu gently pushed the ring onto Chen Xing’s finger.

“I love you, Xing-er,” he whispered.

A sudden cry echoed through the winds, and Xiang Shu looked up. It was a phoenix. As he watched, it spread its fiery wings and spiraled through the storm, ablaze with divine fire capable of consuming and transforming all things. Scattering stardust in its wake, it wove a luminous band like the Milky Way around Xiang Shu.

With a swift twist of its body, it harnessed and directed the flames. There was an earth-shattering boom, and Xiang Shu's body was consumed by the raging flames of rebirth. In the blaze, at the center of the altar, with the ring of stardust around him, he could have been a fire god.

Then the swirling stardust began to transform. It took the shape of a young man, who raised a hand and said, "Sorry for the trouble."

"What?" Xiang Shu asked.

"Not talking to you," said Xiao-Ji. "Bell, come to me!"

An instant later, he had the Soulfall Bell in his hand. It rang once; Xiang Shu and Chen Xing's bodies shook, and from each of their bodies emerged a glowing blue butterfly. At the same time, three more glowing butterflies flew in from the distance, then flitted off in different directions. Floating over the altar, Xiao-Ji extended his arm and turned all of the butterflies into scattered fragments of starlight, which he sent soaring heavenward.

All the scenes flying past them in the rift in time crumbled like scraps of burning paper, then disappeared without a trace.

"He's not mortal," said the phoenix. "There is dragon power, which is similar to phoenix power, among his immortal souls and mortal forms. He will reject his past memories. I don't think it's possible."

With that, it flapped its wings and flew away.

In the dark.

"Farewell," Xiao-Ji's voice said softly. "I'm going home now. Thank you for undoing that shackle called the Silence of All Magic. If you hadn't, I would have been trapped in this world for a long time. I'll miss you, Tianchi."

“Wait!” Chen Xing shouted. “Xiao-Ji! Sui Xing! Hey! Come back here! I’m not in a rush to reincarnate! What are you running so fast for?”

Chen Xing ran forward though the darkness. He didn’t find Xiao-Ji, but he did notice a faint glow in the distance. As it grew closer, he saw what it was.

The butterfly flew toward him, circled him once, and then entered his body.

It was a strange sensation. His senses seemed to have returned to him, and he could feel his hands and feet, but his vision remained completely dark. He saw nothing.

I’m not dead?

Chen Xing raised his hand and groped around. “What is this place?” he muttered to himself.

“The dungeon,” Zhu Xu answered from behind him.

Chapter 89

FOURTH YEAR of the Taiyuan era, first day of the second lunar month, Xiangyang.

Dungeon, dungeon, dungeon.… Zhu Xu's voice seemed echo in his ears. Chen Xing tore off his blindfold and whirled around in disbelief to find Zhu Xu looking back at him, puzzled.

"He's pretending to be blind!" the registrar shouted. It really didn't take much to rile that guy up. "He was pretending! He's a liar!"

As Chen Xing spun back around and hurried into the depths of the dungeon, out of nowhere, a glowing butterfly appeared in front of him. With a flap of its wings, it flew straight into the darkness ahead.

Xiang Shu! Chen Xing thought. *Xiang Shu?! Are you in there?*

He staggered after the butterfly, nearly tripping and falling in his haste. It led him into the deepest part of the dungeon, where it flitted over to a familiar figure lying in the darkness, then disappeared. In the end, Chen Xing's frantic steps did fail him; he fell onto his knees and slid the last few feet along the ground, kicking up dust and dirt.

Xiang Shu lay on his side on the ground, motionless. Chen Xing's eyes brimmed with tears of joy. He let out a scream, unable to contain his emotions, and wrapped Xiang Shu in a tight embrace.

Zhu Xu and the others who had followed him into the room came to a flabbergasted halt.

After the length of time it would take for one incense stick to burn…

Another huge quarrel over Chen Xing's identity had broken out in the governor's manor. Just like last time, people were falling all over each other to express that this young man's intentions were dubious and needed to be thoroughly investigated.

"The official document issued by Xie An is unlikely to be a fake! What do you want me—" Zhu Xu broke off and blinked, looking suddenly

stupefied. “Why does it feel like I’ve said these exact words before?”

He wasn’t the only one; everyone else had the sudden feeling that they’d been in this situation once before. Unperturbed, the diplomat said, “Daren, he must’ve come for that death row prisoner. He’s acting in a deliberately confusing manner, and calling himself an ‘exorcist’ is an obvious scam. There’s something very strange about that prisoner’s origins, too.”

Doubt was plastered all over Zhu Xu’s face, but he didn’t respond. He was lost in thought.

In the guest room above the manor, Chen Xing held Xiang Shu in his arms. He was so overcome with emotion that at first he just sobbed, but after a moment, the sobs turned to laughter, and then he couldn’t stop. He hadn’t done anything else since bringing Xiang Shu out of the dungeon and into the guest room, just hugged Xiang Shu’s upper body against his chest, by turns crying and laughing.

Xiang Shu didn’t make a sound.

“I had no idea you were like that,” Chen Xing said. It was incomparably sad to think about their last moments together, his first glimpse of the Dinghai Pearl. He pulled far enough away to look down at Xiang Shu again, only to sob even harder. “Why didn’t you just tell me from the beginning?”

The shattered Dinghai Pearl, the light that filled the entire sky, the Revival of All Magic, the rotating wheel of causality… In a single instant, the seconds before their deaths flashed through Chen Xing’s mind. He was certain now: In the very last moment, they had gone back in time, back to three years ago.

“This time, we’re going to succeed!” he told Xiang Shu. “We will! I won’t *ever* leave you again, Xiang Shu!”

Still, there were things about that last moment that Chen Xing didn’t understand. Perhaps it was because if Xiang Shu died, the Dinghai Pearl would shatter—so, in order to protect him, they’d been sent back to the past? It didn’t matter, he decided; he could ask again after Xiang Shu had

recovered. He must've used up all of the mana in his body in order to alter their fate.

Xiang Shu's eyes were shut tight. In the dungeon, he had opened them for a short time and briefly returned to clarity before falling back into unconsciousness.

"Oh, right," Chen Xing said, remembering belatedly, "you need to take the medicine first." He'd almost forgotten that when they first met, Xiang Shu had been on his deathbed, and that he'd only recovered thanks to the last of the revival pills Chen Xing's shifu had given him. He remembered now that Xiang Shu also hadn't been able to speak or move for twelve hours after he took the pill…

Chen Xing crushed the pill up in his own mouth and fed it to Xiang Shu. Afterward, he touched his forehead to check on him, his eyes fixed on Xiang Shu's lips.

"This time, I'll be the one following you so closely there won't be even an inch of space between us," Chen Xing said softly. "And don't you ever think of abandoning me, either—not if we're chased to the ends of the earth. Not even if I die tomorrow."

Maybe this miracle, their return to the day they first met, was a blessing from the heavens. Xiang Shu was terribly thin, so thin that Chen Xing was distraught for him; seeing him made Chen Xing feel sad and glad at the same time. He thought back on their final moments. Xiang Shu had held Chen Xing in his embrace just like Chen Xing was holding him now. And he'd lowered his head and kissed him…

The affection in Chen Xing's heart suddenly flared. It burned so fiercely that he didn't know how to contain it any longer.

Gradually, Xiang Shu's cold body warmed; his lips regained their color and became less dry and lifeless. Still holding him in his arms, Chen Xing moved and lowered his head a little. He couldn't resist the impulse to take advantage of Xiang Shu's sleeping state and kiss him.

Just kiss him, Chen Xing told himself. *He won't wake up. Just give it a go and kiss him.*

He leaned in…and Xiang Shu did wake up. He opened his eyes and stared at Chen Xing.

Worse, the door to the guest room wasn't closed. Zhu Xu, who had come up to observe Chen Xing, was greeted by the sight of Chen Xing not merely hugging the immobilized prisoner who had just been rescued from death row, but actually lowering his head in an attempt to kiss him. Zhu Xu was stunned into silence, too embarrassed to say anything at all.

Noticing his audience, Chen Xing coughed awkwardly. He cast a doubtful look at Zhu Xu, who seemed to have forgotten everything about the last three years of his life. Was it possible that when they'd returned to three years ago, Chen Xing was the only one who'd retained his memories?

Chen Xing laid Xiang Shu down flat and approached Zhu Xu, intending to drive him away. "Zhu-daren, I still have work to do," he said, closing the door. "Would you please come back later? Oh, except I guess you won't be free later, so…bye for now!"

"Guards!" Zhu Xu roared, furious. "Take this con man downstairs and lock him up until we decide what to do with him!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Chen Xing exclaimed. Why was this so different from last time?! "Let me explain! I'll explain right now!"

But Zhu Xu's subordinates had already broken into the room. They flanked Chen Xing and dragged him away, leaving Xiang Shu lying alone on the bed. Xiang Shu watched it all happen, unable to speak.

"The Qin army is going to attack the city tonight!" Chen Xing yelled from where he was being dragged across the ground. "Zhu-daren! When I snuck into Xiangyang, I overheard some important military intelligence! Hear me out!"

Zhu Xu stopped, turned his head, and looked at Chen Xing.

After another incense stick's time had passed, Chen Xing stood on the terrace of the governor's manor. "Listen to me," he said. "Do not *ever* touch Xiang Shu. You have no idea who he is."

Overhead, unseen, a crimson bird perched on the eaves, its body wreathed in flames.

"I just knew you were up to something," said Zhu Xu, cold as ice. "Go on. One wrong word and both of your heads will roll. Even if this city

falls tonight, I can still kill you today!”

Snow fell endlessly around them. Zhu Xu stood on the manor’s third-floor terrace, overlooking the whole of Xiangyang and all of its city lights. Chen Xing took a deep breath, on some level still struggling to accept that he had really returned to the past. In one moment, his heart would burst with joy; in the next, he’d feel certain that something was still amiss, that some parts weren’t playing out quite right. It was like he was inside a dream, sometimes laughing, sometimes feeling heavy.

He didn’t have time right now to think about it, though. He had to resolve the problem in front of him.

“How should I put this?” Chen Xing mused. He thought it over and decided that brevity was best. “I’ll cut to the chase. To tell you the truth, Zhu-daren, I am, in fact, an exorcist. I came here because three hundred years ago, all of the magic—”

Wait. Were they still under the Silence of All Magic, or had the magic been restored? Did the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth exist in this moment?!

I feel it! The spiritual qi is circulating! Magic has returned!

Zhu Xu, of course, had no idea what Chen Xing was on about. He turned around and leveled Chen Xing with an imposing gaze, slowly unsheathing his sword. He actually wanted to chop Chen Xing’s head off there and then!

“Whoa, let’s not be too hasty!” Chen Xing’s mind whirled. *How did I manage to dupe this guy last time? Shit, I was too excited—I actually can’t remember!* “Oh, right!”

Chen Xing assumed his serious, worldly persona once more.

“My lord, do you believe supernatural beings and monsters exist? If I say I have magical powers, will you believe me? Oh, for—This just won’t work. I can’t help it! I’m so happy! Zhu-daren! Long time no see! It’s the Revival of All Magic! Chiyou and whoever can all go to hell, okay?! Every dog has its day, and now it’s my time to shine!”

Chen Xing really didn’t know what to do with all the happiness inside his heart. All he wanted was to grab Zhu Xu and celebrate.

Unfortunately, his behavior flabbergasted Zhu Xu to the point of rage. “Guards!” he roared.

“I’ll prove it!” Chen Xing took a deep breath. “If you still don’t believe it once you see it, I’ll stay put, and you can arrest me.” Zhu Xu was trembling with fury. Chen Xing just smiled earnestly at him. “I know what you did earlier today was just to stabilize the army’s morale, and that inside your heart, there was once a ‘lamp.’”

A change came over Zhu Xu’s face as he was struck by another wave of déjà vu. He looked at Chen Xing, his attention focusing and his mood leveling out. “Wait. I don’t know why, but…I suddenly feel as if we know each other.”

“That’s correct,” Chen Xing said immediately. “And though you will surrender the city in a moment, I believe that deep in your heart, you remain loyal to the Great Jin—”

“Xiangyang still hasn’t been breached!” Zhu Xu exploded. “Are you showing your true colors, spy?!”

Chen Xing rolled up his right sleeve. “No. Spy? I’ll show you…” He raised his hand and said, as earnestly as he knew how, “Daren, please. Look.” Then he channeled his energy to activate the Heart Lamp.

In the split second that followed, the manor’s third-floor terrace erupted in a flash of light so bright it could have cleaved heaven and earth apart. Chen Xing and Zhu Xu both cried out in pain.

“MY EYES!” Zhu Xu roared wildly.

“WHAT’S HAPPENING?!” shrieked Chen Xing. “I’M BLIND!”

“ASSASSIN! GUARDS! THERE’S AN ASSASSIN!”

When Chen Xing invoked the Heart Lamp, he’d followed spellcasting principles and mantra power calculations meant for use during the three hundred years of the Silence of All Magic. It was a given that the magical arts had been less effective by far during that era, but Chen Xing hadn’t expected the Heart Lamp’s power to run quite so rampant under the influence of the spiritual qi. It had manifested like a soundless lightning bolt, blooming in intensity some tenfold greater than usual—and flaring up right in front of both of their faces, temporarily blinding them both.

All Chen Xing had seen was an all-encompassing flash of white, then utter darkness when the light disappeared. His vision swam with seemingly countless lights and shadows, a chaotic, disorienting mess. With that one flash of the Heart Lamp, the fiery-red bird perched outside the governor's manor had also spread its wings and flown away.

The registrar rushed out with the register in his hands, alarmed by Zhu Xu's shout. "My lord! Are you both all right?!"

"Assassin?!" Chen Xing shouted. "Where are they?! Catch the assassin!"

Zhu Xu had shouted "Assassin!" thinking that Chen Xing had blinded him to create an opportunity to kill him; Chen Xing, meanwhile, thought it was possible that an assassin had appeared in the moment they both turned blind. They both looked around fruitlessly, their hands groping all over the place, before they finally hugged each other.

After a good while, the soldiers came up and saw that there was no assassin. Chen Xing and Zhu Xu, having finally regained their sight, looked around, gasping for breath. Zhu Xu was frightened and still casting doubtful looks at Chen Xing.

That confirms that all magic has recovered! Chen Xing thought. *Did I overdo it a little?* Aloud, he said, "So…yes, it's just like that. I'm not lying to you. See? I can do magic."

He went to lift his hand, but he had barely moved when Zhu Xu shouted in sudden horror, "Keep your hand down! You almost blinded me just now! What's the use of your magic? What can that light do?"

"Uh… Seems like not much. How come all I can do is emit light still, if all magic has returned? Ah, right! Fire, I summon thee! Why doesn't it work? Maybe the spell and the Heart Lamp repel each other?" Chen Xing snapped his fingers several times, reciting the five-elements mantra, but he still couldn't summon any magic. His mind returned to Xiang Shu… "Ah, forget it. Anyway, as you can see, I am indeed an exorcist, and I came here to find my protector. I'm not deceiving you. Now, since I've already found him, I'll—"

"You and your protector will help me defend the city?"

“No, I need to take him away. I’m swamped. You keep up the good work, okay? See you later in Shouyang!”

“Wait!” Zhu Xu said, chasing Chen Xing. “Exorcist! I have an idea. Later, you can stand at the city gate tower on my behalf and use that light to blind the enemy’s eyes—”

“No time!” Chen Xing shouted, rushing back to the guest room at top speed. “Zhu-daren, do you really think it’d be useful at that distance? The enemy is going to attack the city, and here you are, turning on lanterns for them! Are you afraid the enemy troops won’t be able to find their way in the dark?”

That actually made Zhu Xu reconsider. It was true that at short range, Chen Xing’s skill could be useful, but if the enemy was far away, it would basically just be lighting things up for them. Zhu Xu realized he’d been barking up the wrong tree. “Okay, but then, you’ll—”

Chen Xing looked back over his shoulder. “I’ll tell you something! They’ll arrive soon! Xiangyang will not be able to hold out against them today! But after they enter the city, Murong Chui and the rest will use this place, the governor’s manor, as their base of operations! You’d better set up an ambush at once! Maybe it could change the course of events…”

Zhu Xu was too startled to respond, and right at that moment, shouts began to come from outside.

“The Qin army is besieging the city!”

“The city has fallen!”

Once again, Zhu Xu found himself unable to deal with Chen Xing. He turned around and rushed to the main hall.

Under Murong Chui’s command, the army assaulted the city. Fireballs filled the sky like shooting stars. Chen Xing dashed back to the room and saw that Xiang Shu was still lying on the bed. When he heard Chen Xing’s footsteps, he turned his eyes, with great effort, to look at him.

“We have to escape the city at once,” Chen Xing said, bundling Xiang Shu into a blanket. “Don’t worry, we’ll get out safe.”

Suddenly, Chen Xing remembered that the Qin troops were about to barge in…and he had to pretend to hang himself before they did. So Chen Xing hastened to do exactly what'd done the first time: stuff a bundled-up Xiang Shu under the bed, take off the bed sheet, and roll it into a makeshift rope. He threw the rope over the ceiling beam, tied a knot, and set to work hanging himself.

Xiang Shu stared at Chen Xing from under the bed.

Chen Xing was still getting ready when the door broke in and a Qin soldier rushed inside with a sword in his hands. They'd come too soon! Chen Xing and the Qin soldier stared at each other, the soldier wondering whether he should kill this scholar with his weapon or let him just go ahead and kill himself.

Chen Xing's mind whirled as fast as lightning. *What do I do? What went wrong? Why am I so unlucky this time?! I can't die here!*

If the soldier lifted his sword and rushed at him, Chen Xing's short life would end here and now.

All right, Chen Xing thought frantically, *then let's risk it all and fight.* One brief, shining moment later, Chen Xing bent his knees and pounced over the short table onto the Qin soldier, hollering loudly all the while.

The soldier was caught off guard. This guy had been about to hang himself; why was he suddenly going crazy like this? He took an automatic step back, but Chen Xing managed to get him around the waist and tackle him to the ground.

Xiang Shu watched it all unfold, unable to move a muscle.

The soldier grabbed his sword and unleashed a torrent of curses at him, but Chen Xing was too busy trying to get back to his feet to care. He needed to leave the room before the soldier noticed Xiang Shu hidden under the bed. "Come and get me!" he taunted the soldier. "Come on, come and get me!"

Then, slippery as an eel, he took off.

Sure enough, the soldier took the bait and chased after him, still cursing up a storm. He readied his bow, nocked an arrow, and took aim. Chen Xing just wanted to lead him to the main hall of the governor's

manor; if Zhu Xu was still there, he wouldn't hesitate to kill the Qin soldier. Unfortunately, though, as he ran through the winding corridor, he encountered two more Qin soldiers, who charged aggressively at him. Panicked, he turned tail, picked a random direction, and fled.

The first Qin soldier joined up with the two newcomers, and together all three of them pursued Chen Xing. Chen Xing's heart was about to leap out of his body. He ran into the hallway, where he abruptly spun around, spread his hands, squeezed his eyes shut, and activated the Heart Lamp. "Take this!"

A second earth-rending blast of light had all three Qin soldiers shrieking miserably in unison. Awesome! Chen Xing could rely on this method later when he and Xiang Shu escaped. Quickly, while the soldiers were still down, he went back to carry Xiang Shu away.

This time, though, when Chen Xing went outside, he couldn't find anything useful at all. He snarled, "Where's the wheelbarrow from the first time? Where's the horse?!"

Looking out from under the bed, Xiang Shu watched Chen Xing run back to the room from the courtyard outside. Just before he could cross the threshold, however, the three Qin soldiers followed him back in. From Xiang Shu's vantage point, there was an open door in front of him, and the courtyard outside the door was like a moving painting displaying the following scene:

Chen Xing disappeared to the left side, though he reappeared soon afterward, wielding a leaf net he had grabbed out of nowhere. His other hand jittered from side to side, making him seem very nervous. He wanted to draw them closer before he raised his hand again. The three Qin soldiers then appeared from the right side, each with a sword in hand. They seemed wary of getting too close to Chen Xing, though—it was a stalemate.

First, Chen Xing thought, *let's use the net to strike the middle man on the head, hook him over, and then put his sword at his neck to hold him hostage—that might work. Oh, and when I use the Heart Lamp again, I mustn't forget to close my eyes.*

The leader of the three soldiers had obviously begun to take Chen Xing seriously; none of them were about to lower their guards again just because Chen Xing looked like a scholar. He raised his hand and gave the

order, but just before the three of them could charge and surround Chen Xing, a man appeared atop the wall behind them. As Chen Xing watched, the man bent over and pulled out his twin sabers with both hands. He spun, and a white light flashed.

Chen Xing cried out, and Xiang Shu blinked in alarm.

From Xiang Shu's point of view: Blood splattered everywhere, and Chen Xing backed up suddenly, off to the left. From the other side, a handsome wanderer walked into view, about six feet, six inches tall and wearing a bamboo hat; in the same moment, the three Qin soldiers fell to the ground.

In a straightforward, carefree manner, the wanderer took off his hat and sized Chen Xing up.

"Feng-dage!" Chen Xing sprang to his feet and leaped at Feng Qianjun, flinging his limbs around him.

"Good thing I managed to catch up," Feng Qianjun said. "You mentioned once that you were in Xiangyang on this day. Tianchi! *Tianchi!*" He hugged Chen Xing like his life depended on it and rubbed his back furiously. They both started to cry and laugh, practically bawling in each other's arms.

Xiang Shu still couldn't speak or move.

Chapter 90

FROM THE MOMENT he saw Feng Qianjun, Chen Xing had been over the moon with excitement. “How are you here?” he kept asking, over and over.

Feng Qianjun didn’t answer. He strode right into the room. “Where’s Xiang-xiongdi?”

“He’s under the bed! But go look for horses first! We need to leave Xiangyang as soon as possible!”

“Right,” said Feng Qianjun. “We’ve got to look for a cart, since he’s in no condition to move…” He leaned down and greeted Xiang Shu under the bed, then turned around and headed into the courtyard with Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu blinked.

Chen Xing followed Feng Qianjun out of the governor’s manor.

“What the hell is going on?” Feng Qianjun asked. “I was just bathing in the river! Who’s going to explain to me how it is that one second, we were capturing Shi Hai in the Yin Yang Mirror’s version of Chang’an, and the next I was taking a bath outside Mai City three years earlier?”

Chen Xing looked at him. “Then the last memory you have is…”

That was right: The day they set up their ambush inside the Yin Yang Mirror, Chiyou had taken control of both Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan. Chen Xing had seen neither hide nor hair of them since then, and he had no idea what had happened in those three months. Maybe they had died. Then the Dinghai Pearl had activated, and time reversed. On the day when Chen Xing and Xiang Shu first met, Feng Qianjun had been on his way to Mai City, so he’d been able to come and reunite with them a day later.

“I woke up, and it was the middle of the night,” Feng Qianjun said. “I was so confused, I broke into a residence to ask what day it was. Then I realized: Weren’t you supposed to be in Xiangyang right now? So I came here as fast as possible…”

Obviously Feng Qianjun had been quick to figure out the situation and had promptly made a wise decision—to go find Chen Xing.

“So you remember what happened in the future too,” Chen Xing said. “So do I! It’s strange, then. Why don’t Zhu Xu and the others have any of their memories? What about Xiao Shan? Is he still in Carosha right now? He should be safe for the time being. I didn’t get to know him until this winter…and Xie-shixiong is in Jiankang. Wait, wait—if Xiao Shan is in Carosha, doesn’t that mean Lu Ying is still alive?!”

A myriad of questions surged into Chen Xing’s mind, things he hadn’t had the time to think about until now. The vast array of possibilities and implications was a little overwhelming.

“My ge should still be alive too,” Feng Qianjun added. “I don’t know about Wang Ziye, though. Did you guys manage to kill him? Wait, wait, the most important thing to do right now is escape. Then we can find a place to discuss this properly!”

Right on cue, Chen Xing yelled, “Someone’s coming!”

A group of Qin cavalrymen were galloping straight toward Feng Qianjun. Chen Xing was about to tell Feng Qianjun to close his eyes so he could dazzle them with the Heart Lamp when Feng Qianjun drew his saber and gave it a casual wave in the direction of the street. In the blink of an eye, all the trees along the main street fell, knocking over Qin soldiers and horses alike.

Chen Xing let out a shocked noise.

“I was surprised to find that the Saber of Harmony and Life has changed as well,” said Feng Qianjun.

“Because magic has returned…” Chen Xing shook his head. “We have to find some horses first. We’ve put it off for too long.”

“That’s right! We can think it over in detail later.”

They ran toward the fallen Qin troops, but the soldiers were so scared that they scrambled back onto their horses and ran away.

“Hey, don’t run!” Chen Xing shouted after them. “At least leave your horses behind!”

Feng Qianjun almost tripped over one of the trees he'd just knocked over, and they didn't manage to catch up with the warhorses. Defeated, he looked over at Chen Xing.

"Why is my luck so bad today?" Chen Xing asked as they returned to the courtyard and reentered Xiang Shu's field of vision. They were going to have to carry Xiang Shu in their arms and flee the city on foot. Thankfully, this time Feng Qianjun was here.

They turned to look under the bed at Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu's eyes were full of confusion, but he just stared at them, unable to open his mouth to speak.

"It's dawn. How long until he can move?"

"Don't get your hopes up. He's still got a few more hours to go."

Feng Qianjun sighed. "Ah, this won't be easy. I'm afraid that if I'm carrying him, I won't be able to look after you. Where's your Sui Xing? Hurry up and ask it for two horses."

"Sui…Sui Xing?" Chen Xing repeated. "Sui Xing! Sui Xing!" Suddenly, his memories of the darkness resurfaced, and he stood there, blinking like a fool. "Sui Xing has left! I see! It's because he's gone! My luck is back to normal!"

Feng Qianjun raised his eyebrows. "Gone where? That's not funny. Are you for real?"

Xiang Shu was very confused.

"Is it really gone?" Chen Xing looked down at his own hands. "I don't need to die? I can keep on living?!"

A sudden shower of arrows came down in the courtyard outside, and there was a round of loud whoops from the Qin troops. Evidently, reinforcements had arrived and were shooting arrows at the governor's manor instead of barging straight in. Arrows struck the door they were standing beside. It was chaos.

"Watch out for stray arrows!" Feng Qianjun yelled. "The Qin army's arrowheads are all coated with a strong anesthetic!"

But it was too late. To Xiang Shu's alarm, Chen Xing screamed in pain as a stray arrow pierced his thigh.

“Go hide inside!” shouted Feng Qianjun. “I’ll take care of this!”

“Ahh! I got hit!” Chen Xing wailed. “Ha ha ha, an arrow hit me!”

Feng Qianjun was at his wits’ end. “Are you crazy?! Go inside and dress it, quick!”

Chen Xing hobbled inside, tripping over the threshold. His destiny, which had tormented him for his entire life, had been lifted!

“I got hit by an arrow!” Chen Xing turned to Xiang Shu, laughing. “I’m… Sui Xing is gone… This…a-arrow…”

His smile slowly froze on his face.

“This arrow…is poisoned,” he said, and toppled over onto the floor.

Feng Qianjun left the courtyard for a time, and several loud shouts came from outside as he took care of the Qin troops. When he returned to the room, he found Chen Xing lying there, paralyzed, a smile frozen on his face. He ran over and shook him. “Tianchi!”

Xiang Shu watched them, not saying a word.

Another two hours later…

Feng Qianjun tied Chen Xing’s immobilized form onto a horse he’d found, positioned in front of the saddle. Xiang Shu, wrapped in a quilt, already lay horizontally across another horse’s back. Like that, the three of them managed to escape Xiangyang.

By the time the sun rose, the governor’s manor was ablaze. Equipped with Chen Xing’s warning, Zhu Xu had set his plan into action—when Murong Chui and his men entered the manor to set up a base, he lit the manor on fire. Then he and his few remaining soldiers attacked with everything they had.

They were no match for the Qin soldiers. Defeated and captured, they surrendered to the Qin.

In the fourth year of the Taiyuan era, on the second day of the second lunar month, Xiangyang fell.

Two steeds charged out of the besieged city, breaking through black smoke and galloping south. Far off in the distance, far from the conflagrations consuming Xiangyang, a golden-red bird spread its wings, circled north, and followed Chen Xing.

Chang'an.

A gloomy rain fell, marking the beginning of spring. The sky was thick with clouds, and thunder rumbled in the distance. It was morning, but Chang'an remained dark.

Spring mornings in Chang'an didn't get more ordinary than this one. Stores and stalls along both sides of the street had opened for the day, and various officials were entering the palace for the morning court session. Flora of all kinds poked their heads out of the damp ground. It was what the people sometimes called the day the dragon raised its head—the second day of the second month was when the dragon of the north awakened.

On the surface, everything was as it always was…but in the middle of the night, Wang Ziye had noticed a change.

At the beginning of the fourth night watch, he headed to the stargazing platform, but in this weather there was nothing to see but dark clouds and a light drizzle. The royal astrologer, having heard that Wang Ziye was on his way, felt compelled to get up and keep him company. He braved the rain and climbed up to the platform, his eyes still bleary with sleep. "Wang-daren?"

Wang Ziye stood on the platform, looking bewildered. He reached out to catch some of the rain in his palm. "This world," he murmured. "What day is it today?"

"The day the dragon raises its head. The day the earth's energy awakens."

"Magic has been restored," said Wang Ziye. "How is that possible? What happened?"

In the span of a single night, the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth had returned, just as quietly as it had vanished three hundred years

prior. It was impossible to pinpoint the exact time it had happened, but it might have been somewhere around midnight…

Wang Ziye thought back to the moment he realized something had changed. That was right, it had been at midnight—midnight on the second day of the second month. What had happened? Where had it begun? Had the Dinghai Pearl shattered?! Impossible! And why had nothing visibly changed? It was impossible for a surge of spiritual qi like this to occur without leaving a trace! Where had Xiang Yuyan hidden it?

Wang Ziye turned promptly around, descended the platform, and returned to his carriage. The driver asked, “My lord, are you heading to court?”

“Take me to the Songbai Residence,” Wang Ziye ordered. “Now.”

At noon, beside an abandoned house by a creek in Huang Village, in Jingzhou, a red-gold bird swooped in and perched on a parasol tree.

The anesthesia had finally worn off. Chen Xing dressed his thigh wound simply and then fetched water to wash Xiang Shu’s face. Feng Qianjun, who was exhausted from riding all through the night, found some rice that the fleeing villagers had left behind and set about making congee.

“What a handsome piece of jade,” Chen Xing murmured, looking at Xiang Shu. The longer he looked, the more he liked him.

Xiang Shu’s brow furrowed ever so slightly. He was starting to regain some movement in his face, and he was staring at Chen Xing. Chen Xing peeked over at Feng Qianjun, hoping to find Feng Qianjun preoccupied with something else so that he could duck his head down and kiss Xiang Shu. The thought alone made his cheeks grow warm.

“How much longer do we have to wait for the medicine to wear off?” Feng Qianjun asked. “This food won’t be enough for all of us. We’ll have to make do for now… Once we reach Mai City we can all pitch in to bankrupt the Dongzhe Bank.”

Chen Xing staggered a little as he got up to change the water for Xiang Shu. “Wait until Xiang Shu has recovered and eaten something. We

have to figure out the situation first—there are so many unknown variables.” He sat back down to wipe Xiang Shu’s face.

“No. When I headed this way, I took note of one important thing: The Dongzhe Bank in Xiangyang City was still open.”

“That’s right, but—”

“That is *the* most important point.”

Chen Xing stopped what he was doing and turned to look doubtfully at Feng Qianjun.

“Based on the fact that the Dongzhe Bank still exists,” Feng Qianjun said, “we can deduce everything that is to come. If that branch of Dongzhe Bank is still around, then Wen Che is still around too.”

“Oh, true! Otherwise it’d make no sense!” Although Chen Xing had been paralyzed by the anesthetic for this entire trip, he had been thinking. Was Shi Hai still alive? And where was Chiyou? Had the Dinghai Pearl transported everyone three years into the past? If it had, then those people who died in those past three years were all still here!

“Wen Che is still around,” Feng Qianjun continued, “which means that everybody else is also still around.”

“Qing-er is still here!” Chen Xing got up, laughing.

Feng Qianjun’s eyes turned bright with tears, but he nodded. “Tuoba Yan, too.”

Chen Xing let out a noise of joy. Tuoba Yan wasn’t dead! “Lu Ying as well… And the Akele king, they’re all here…”

But wait—that meant that Che Luofeng was also still around. That thought put a real damper on Chen Xing’s spirits. He glared at Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu blinked, and Chen Xing flicked him on the forehead, leaving behind a shallow red mark.

“Qinghe is still here too,” Feng Qianjun added, and in that moment, Chen Xing understood that Feng Qianjun was in big trouble. Feng Qianjun raised his eyebrows. “And so is Shi Hai, probably.”

“True.” Chen Xing nodded and got up to clean the towel again. He was so hungry that he had no strength left. “Is the congee ready yet? Let’s

eat first before we continue. There's so much to do…"

Suddenly, a little dog ran over to them, apparently having smelled the congee. It wagged its tail vigorously at Chen Xing and barked at him. "Woof! Woof! Woof!"

Chen Xing felt as if he'd been struck by lightning. "Feng-dage?" he mumbled.

Feng Qianjun looked around. "Oh! It's Xiang Shu!"

Xiang Shu, sitting propped up against the wall to sun, still wrapped in a blanket, stared at them. A strange expression had come over his face.

"Xiang Shu!" Chen Xing shouted, wild with joy. "Xiang Shu! You're here too! I'm so happy!"

This was the dog that had been stabbed to death by the corrupted Princess Qinghe in its attempt to protect Chen Xing. None of the poems or books Chen Xing had studied throughout his life had prepared him to capture the excitement he felt upon seeing it again, so he didn't even try; he just leaped at the dog.

Unfortunately, the dog was startled by Chen Xing's enthusiasm, and it turned around to run away. With the arrow wound in his thigh, the best Chen Xing could do was limp and hobble along after it.

"Xiang Shu! Don't run! Don't you recognize me?" Feng Qianjun hastily put down the ladle he'd been using to make congee and ran over, forgetting for a moment that the real Xiang Shu was watching all of this unfold. Like Chen Xing, the only thing that existed to him right now was the dog.

"Quick, catch it!" Chen Xing said. "Don't let it run away!"

Feng Qianjun raced after it. "It thinks you're playing with it! You stop running!"

"I can't control myself! Oh, Xiang Shu! Come here! I missed you so much!"

The pair of them ran around in front of Xiang Shu like headless chickens, chasing the dog all over the place. The dog scurried around and toyed with the limping Chen Xing for a bit, then finally ran over to the congee pot, where Chen Xing scooped it up in his arms and embraced it,

crying and laughing and kissing its doggy face like his life depended on it. He was one step away from bawling into the dog's fur.

Feng Qianjun watched them from off to one side, grinning…and then his vision went dark, and he fell to the ground.

Chen Xing blinked, but before he could turn around, he took a smack to the back of his own head and passed out. Xiang Shu pulled his hand back and let him collapse.

A quarter of an hour later, Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing were both trussed up and piled in the backyard where Xiang Shu had tossed them. The dog was circling Xiang Shu's feet, while Xiang Shu shaved off his stubble with Chen Xing's dagger, using water from the well as a mirror. Xiang Shu turned around and left to get more water from the creek.

Chapter 90.5

“He doesn’t remember anything?” Feng Qianjun asked in disbelief. “Why didn’t you say so?”

Chen Xing’s mind was utterly blank. His confidence had taken a heavy blow. “I thought… How could I have guessed that? Why did he forget it all? Is it because he’s the Dinghai Pearl?”

“What?!” Feng Qianjun yelled. “He’s the Dinghai Pearl?!”

“Xiang—”

“Shh!” Feng Qianjun said. Chen Xing glanced at him for a moment before his gaze flicked in the direction in which Xiang Shu had left. Feng Qianjun lowered his voice. “Listen to me! You listen to me, Chen Xing!”

Chen Xing took a deep breath. When he looked at the ropes he was bound with, his face crumpled.

“Do you want to tell him that he’s lost his memories?” Feng Qianjun demanded. “Do you really think he’ll believe anything you say? Are you going to tell him about everything that’s happened?”

Chen Xing turned his confused gaze on Feng Qianjun and shook his head. “He probably wouldn’t even wait for me to finish… He’d say I was making up a story and gag me.”

“Then don’t say anything for now. Let me think of a way for us to get out of these ropes first, then we can work together to capture him… Actually, never mind, you sit here and don’t move. I’ll be fine on my own.”

Chen Xing was slowly approaching clearheadedness, but with it came a swell of desperation. “Can you detain Xiang Shu? And what happens after you capture him? Are you going to use force to make him listen while we explain our situation? He’d never believe it!”

Maybe if Xiang Shu had ever lost any memories in the past, they would have had a chance. In that case, Xiang Shu might have taken their story with a grain of salt and found ways later to verify the truth of their

words. But Xiang Shu had never had any gaps in his memory. It was hopeless.

“Can you free yourself?” Chen Xing asked quietly.

“These ropes cannot restrain me,” Feng Qianjun said. “It’ll just…take me a little time to get out of them. But I want to wait and observe the situation first!”

What could they do? Chen Xing was still thinking about this when Xiang Shu returned, having apparently gone to finish shaving his stubble in the creek. He didn’t seem to have overheard their discussion about the Dinghai Pearl. Now, with his handsome visage back on display for the world to see, he began to eat the congee that Feng Qianjun had made.

Off to the side, the dog kept barking until a cold look from Xiang Shu shut it up. After a while, though, when the congee was no longer boiling hot, Xiang Shu ladled a small portion of it into a bowl and gave it to the dog.

“Leave some for us, Xiongdi!” Feng Qianjun said. “We’re starving to death here!”

Xiang Shu looked suspiciously at Feng Qianjun and said nothing. Then his gaze shifted to land on Chen Xing’s face, and in the instant their eyes met, Chen Xing was certain: This was the Xiang Shu he knew. It was as if they’d suddenly come to that same unspoken understanding they’d had before, even if Xiang Shu evidently didn’t remember. The expression on his face told Chen Xing that Xiang Shu wanted to say something, was dying to say it, but didn’t have the words.

“Xiongdi, loosen our bonds for us. We have something to tell you,” Feng Qianjun pleaded.

“Just go ahead and say whatever you want to say,” Chen Xing whispered.

Feng Qianjun whispered back to him. “What I’m doing now is getting him to let his guard down before I try persuading him. This strategy makes things easier. It’s called the art of speech.”

“His ears are very sharp, you know. Whispering won’t do anything. You might as well be speaking right into his ear.”

Feng Qianjun thought about it for a moment and realized that was true. “Xiongdi,” he tried instead, “let me show you a magic trick. Let’s make a bet. You want to make a bet?”

As usual, Xiang Shu didn’t say anything. He avoided Chen Xing’s gaze, looking into the bowl of congee in front of him, but his heart didn’t seem to be in it. Doubt was written across his face, as if he were facing a number of questions that he didn’t have answers to.

Finally, he rose and mounted one of the horses. The little dog looked at Chen Xing, then looked at Xiang Shu. It hesitated for a second, but ultimately, it didn’t race up to the horse; instead, it ran over and came to a stop in front of Chen Xing, then turned and barked a few times at Xiang Shu.

“Yah!” Xiang Shu shouted, and just like last time, he kicked his horse into motion and left.

Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun both stared after him, mouths agape. “He didn’t even untie the ropes for us this time,” Chen Xing lamented.

“He probably sensed that I’d have no problem getting out of them… What should we do now? Go to Mai City and block his way? Xiang Shu, bring me my saber, over there. The saber. That! Go, go get it!”

Chen Xing was out of ideas. The dog started gnawing at the ropes around Chen Xing while Feng Qianjun lay on his side on the ground, inching bit by bit like a caterpillar toward the side of the well, where the Saber of Harmony and Life had been left. If he could get his hands on the saber, he could free them from the ropes.

“I’m hungry,” Chen Xing complained, confused and upset. “Let’s eat first. Of all people, why did it have to be him who forgot?!”

A man’s voice answered him. “Because within the Dinghai Pearl lies the remnants of Zhuyin’s dragon energy.”

Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing both jumped. There, on the parasol tree by the side of the yard, perched a golden-red bird with its wings spread. Before their eyes, it turned into a blazing ball of fire, which then morphed into the form of a naked man. The flames wreathed the man’s body, draping over him to became a royal robe.

He had a head of hair as red as burning flame. His royal robe looked like a raging fire under bright sunlight, or perhaps like the glow of a rising sun. Two red-gold tail feathers were tied to his belt, so long that they trailed against the ground. The robe hung loose upon his shoulders, displaying his bare torso with its fine, pale skin and muscles brimming with power.

“A…phoenix?” Feng Qianjun had heard of phoenixes, and the golden embroidery on this man’s royal robes did indeed depict a flying phoenix wreathed in flame. He and Chen Xing came to a simultaneous realization about the Revival of All Magic:

When the spiritual qi returned to the mortal world, so too had the yao.

“Wow,” Chen Xing said. “Why are you wearing so little? Kind of indecent, don’t you think?”

The phoenix didn’t dignify this with a response. It didn’t matter to Chen Xing either way, though; from the moment he saw the phoenix’s outfit, he’d been preoccupied by the thought of Xiang Shu wearing it. What a commotion that would cause!

“Don’t offend him,” Feng Qianjun hissed, increasing the speed with which he was wiggling toward the Saber of Harmony and Life. “I’m pretty sure we’re no match for a yaoguai this powerful.”

“Fear not,” said the phoenix. “From the one who brought about the Revival of All Magic, thereby allowing me to be reborn again from the flames, I can tolerate a little lip.”

This phoenix had a surprisingly good attitude. The corners of Chen Xing’s mouth twitched. “When did you find us… Oh! You’re that phoenix!” He remembered now—this phoenix had come from the ashes stored in the amber pendant Lu Ying gave him! “You’re that one! It’s you! I always kept you fastened around my waist.”

“There is only one phoenix in this realm.” The phoenix walked toward Chen Xing without even a glance at Feng Qianjun. He blocked out the light of the sun as he peered down at Chen Xing from high above. “And that is I.”

“Ah…” Chen Xing tried hard to find something to say, but he came up short. It didn’t seem like the phoenix was here to cause him trouble, and while, yes, he had been sealed away in the amber before, that amber had accompanied Chen Xing to many places in his travels across the land. He even felt some familiar affection for it. “Wait a moment. That thing you said just now… Why doesn’t Xiang Shu remember anything?”

The phoenix turned and walked into the sunlight. He glanced at the dog, which had backed away in terror behind Chen Xing and was now curled into a trembling ball. Ordinary animals were like ants to the phoenix.

With a sweep of his robe’s sleeve, golden rays emanated from his body that displayed his final memories from the rift in time, before the immense wheel of causality had turned backward. Chen Xing had already fallen unconscious by then, and so it was a revelation to learn that it was

this very True Fire Phoenix, reborn in flame, who had recreated Xiang Shu's body after the Revival of All Magic.

"I made a vow," the phoenix said. "Whomsoever could restore the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth would receive my aid in three things. The Dinghai Pearl was not a part of the web of causality, so when it shattered, I took charge at the last moment and helped Shulü Kong reconstruct his physical body. I imagine you will not resent this having been the first of the granted wishes."

"No," Chen Xing agreed, as if waking from a dream. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"If you didn't do that, what would have happened?" asked Feng Qianjun.

"Causality has been altered, but the Dinghai Pearl is outside the web of causality, so Xiang Shu would have disappeared," Chen Xing murmured. He turned back to the phoenix. "Without you, when we returned to the present, the Xiang Shu in the prison would have vanished entirely!"

"Correct. Importantly, the Xiang Shu of this time is no longer the Dinghai Pearl, but the dragon energy is still coiled around his soul. Sui Xing also exists outside of causality, and just before he sent you all back, he used the Soulfall Bell to extract your memories—yours, Shulü Kong's, Feng Qianjun's, Xiao Shan's, and Xie An's—and an arcane technique to protect them. Then, when you arrived in this timeline, he injected them back into your souls. That is why you can remember everything that happened before the tides of time reversed."

Chen Xing finally understood. "But why hasn't Xiang Shu remembered anything yet?"

"Memories are born from the power of the immortal souls, but the dragon strength in Shulü Kong's body is fighting his immortal souls. As a result, his body has suppressed the memories that were returned to him. He won't remember now, but in time, after his dragon strength gradually merges together with his immortal souls, he may begin to remember, little by little. That will, however, depend on the rest of you."

Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing looked at each other. The phoenix had spent so much time talking, but in the end everything he'd said was kind of

useless…

Chen Xing nodded. “Even Zhu Xu said that he had a feeling we’d met before. I think… I hope Xiang Shu will manage to remember.”

“None of this is relevant,” said the phoenix. “I have come here to remind you of a matter of utmost importance.”

“Well…if it’s so important, Your Majesty, do you think you could untie us before you say it?” said Feng Qianjun.

The phoenix completely ignored him and carried on speaking to Chen Xing. “Though the Dinghai Pearl has been changed by causality, and magic has returned, you mustn’t take things lightly. As a falling leaf is drawn to the ground, fate will lean in the same direction as last time, and it will self-correct when it deviates from its course…”

A cold thrill shot through Chen Xing’s heart. “So Shi Hai is still here, and he’ll still revive Chiyou, and three years from now, the same things will happen?”

“That may not be the case,” the phoenix said at length. “Logically, if no variables changed, then indeed, destiny would return to its original course. But two variables have already changed: Sui Xing has departed from your natal chart, and I have been reborn. After Sui Xing departed your natal chart, he helped you all keep your original memories, and I helped Shulü Kong by rebuilding his physical form.”

“Oh!” Now Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun understood. Without those altered “variables,” as the phoenix put it, the exorcists wouldn’t have remembered anything about Wang Ziye after the rotating wheel of causality reversed and they went three years into the past; they would also have entirely forgotten Xiang Shu’s existence. Xiang Shu’s absence would still have changed the situation—Chen Xing would have been unable to find his Protector Martial God—but with the Revival of All Magic, he would have had the power to challenge Chiyou regardless. Then, because none of them would have remembered anything from before, things would have gone much the same. All those people who died would probably have died again. In the end, Chen Xing would have rounded up all of the exorcists in the world, found the Acala Blade, and leveraged the power of humans and yao alike to wage a battle against Chiyou.

It would have been just as difficult as the first time to predict the final outcome—who would win and who would lose.

But thanks to the two variables that Sui Xing and the phoenix had changed by their combined efforts, things were different.

“I understand,” Chen Xing said. “I will be very careful.”

“You must dedicate all of your efforts to changing variables so as to alter the well-worn path of cause and effect. A single change is insufficient, but countless variables added together will produce an enormous wave in the sea of time. Only then can the Demon God be truly defeated in battle.”

“Thank you,” said Feng Qianjun.

“No need to be polite,” the phoenix replied. “I do not want the yao clans to fall under Chiyou’s control, and even less do I wish to see my subjects become walking corpses.”

Chen Xing nodded. “What do you plan to do after this?”

“I have come forth to make good on my word to grant you three of your heart’s desires. One wish has been used, and now two remain. The wishes must be for things that are within my power to grant, and only after they are granted will I be able to leave with my heart at peace.”

“How about you let us out first, and then we can discuss it?” Chen Xing asked.

The phoenix’s brows rose. He snapped his fingers, and—*pa!*—the ropes binding them burned to ash.

“The second wish has been granted,” the phoenix said. “The last one, quickly.”

“Wait!” Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing protested simultaneously, equally irate.

Chen Xing flexed his wrists. “What the hell kind of move was that?” He was at the end of his rope with this guy.

The phoenix was unmoved. In fact, he seemed to grow impatient, judging by the “whenever you’re ready” gesture he made.

“That can’t count as the second. I didn’t even phrase it properly.”

“Your phrasing doesn’t make it count more or count less.”

“If you’re in such a rush to leave, why did you even tell me about needing to fulfill three of my wishes? If you didn’t say anything, we wouldn’t have known about it, and you could have left as soon as you finished speaking.”

“That’s true,” Feng Qianjun put in. “Or you could have said it was just one wish. There wouldn’t be a problem then either, right?”

“I do not intend to lie to myself,” the phoenix said primly.

“Well, if you’ve decided not to lie to yourself, you should carry out this task properly—”

Before Feng Qianjun could finish his sentence, the phoenix lifted a hand and shot a formidable wave of energy at Feng Qianjun’s chest. Thankfully, Feng Qianjun had quick reflexes, and he immediately spun and dropped to the ground, pressing his face into the dirt. A blazing streak of flame passed right over him and shot into the distance, where it created an earthshaking explosion.

Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing stared in shock. The phoenix snapped again, and six fireballs circled around Feng Qianjun, penning him in. With that, the phoenix turned politely to Chen Xing. “Tell me.”

Chen Xing began to rack his brains.

The phoenix shot another glance at Feng Qianjun, who was immobilized once again. “I prefer not to kill people so lightly. My first kill after my rebirth should be a little more meaningful than this.”

“If you kill Feng-dage to strong-arm me, then my third wish will be for you to revive him,” Chen Xing said.

The phoenix frowned. Something about his expression quickly shifted, and the fireballs disappeared.

As Chen Xing watched the phoenix, a thought occurred to him. “Can you still revive people?”

“No,” the phoenix said coldly. “Only at the instant of my revival, when I split up my essence of flame and release it, can I recreate a body for a human. As for reviving their soul, that is not within my power, but luckily, in Shulü Kong’s case, Sui Xing was present. I am compelled to remind you

that you must treat your own life with respect. If you die, Sui Xing will not be there to protect you, and there will be no way to revive you again."

"Oh… So to revive Xiang Shu, you had to use up some of your own cultivation. Thank you, Phoenix," Chen Xing said with feeling. "You're really great."

"Tell me your wish," the phoenix repeated.

There passed a long period of silence as they stared each other down. In the end, Chen Xing cracked a grateful smile. "I really can't think of anything. How about you travel with us for a while first? Maybe after a while I'll manage to come up with something."

Let a potential ally go just like that, without getting something out of him? You think I'm dumb? Chen Xing thought. *I know there's no way you'll help us fight, but you'll have to protect me—good luck carrying out my last wish if I'm dead!*

The phoenix watched Chen Xing for a long moment, turned his head, and mouthed a few unvoiced curse words. Then he turned back and nodded. "Very good."

Catching on, Feng Qianjun shot Chen Xing a thumbs-up.

An hour later, Chen Xing found a colorful, padded cotton jacket and temporarily draped it over himself to fend off the spring chill. His party had now increased to include, in addition to himself, one human, one phoenix, and one dog. He looked up at the infinite heavens and around at the vast lands, basking in the vigorous and lively spiritual qi.

"Nothing from last time counts," he said, full of hope. "We're going to turn a new page and redo it all. Onward!"

Chapter 91

“YAO KING, WHAT IS YOUR NAME?” Chen Xing asked eagerly. They were in Mai City now. “How should I address you?”

The phoenix resolutely ignored him, his perfect, handsome face marred by a glower.

Feng Qianjun had withdrawn money from the local Xifeng branch, bought Chen Xing a change of clothes, and also purchased a small mink jacket for the dog. Chen Xing was chatting to the phoenix as he changed his clothes in the tailor’s shop. The cheek of this boy made the phoenix want to slap him to the ends of the earth.

“You probably don’t have a name right now, do you?” Chen Xing mused. “Phoenixes are reborn once every hundred years and reincarnate once every thousand years, and after ten cycles of rebirth through fire, they become a new self.”

Even under the Silence of All Magic, Chen Xing had studied the origins, characteristics, and other details of the yaoguai in the mortal world. And it was a good thing he did—those stories were coming in handy now.

Once upon a time, all the world’s yaoguai had been sealed inside the Hundred-Thousand Mountains of the Southern Frontier. When the spiritual qi disappeared, the barriers lifted, and the yaoguai, having lost all their powers, scattered to the human realm. In time—perhaps over the next ten or twenty years—the number of yaoguai in the world would increase again. When that time came, the Exorcism Department, which dealt with yaoguai, would need to be rebuilt.

Once he’d changed his clothes, Chen Xing took the dog and left the shop. Standing in the streets of Mai City under the bright sunlight, he kept thinking about the fact that the phoenix hadn’t mentioned a name when he appeared and introduced himself. Chen Xing was pretty sure he was right that this reincarnation was nameless. “Would you mind if I gave you a name?” he said.

The phoenix said nothing.

“When you returned to this world, light came back to heaven and earth,” Chen Xing said earnestly. “Hmm… Spiritual qi was restored, and light came back with you! I’ll name you…”

The phoenix’s eyebrow twitched slightly.

“Tian Liang? Or Xiao-Liang? What about Da-Liang? A-Liang? Liangliang?”[22]

For a moment, the phoenix had no idea what to say. Then he snapped back to his senses. “They all sound terrible! No way! Absolutely not!”

Chen Xing knew how important names were to yaoguai. When a yaoguai completed its cultivation, it needed recognition from a human before it could truly ascend. For example, if a snake managed to become a jiao, it still needed a human—an embodiment of the spirit of all living things—to point at it and say, “Whoa! A jiao!” Only then could it shed its old form and take to the skies. This process was called feng zheng, or formal recognition. But even after being recognized, the yao would still lack a real name. A human bestowing a name upon the yao represented another step forward. In the Divine Land, only gods, humans, and dragons had the right to name things; it had been that way since ancient times.

It didn’t seem like this phoenix was against the idea of Chen Xing naming him, but he watched the phoenix carefully to be certain. Sure enough, while the phoenix was clearly getting irritated by the options Chen Xing was offering, he didn’t protest against being named.

“Chong Liang? Fu Liang?” Chen Xing tried. “Chong Ming? Ming Liang? You pick.”

The phoenix opened his mouth, about to answer, but then stopped himself. Chen Xing knew that not even a phoenix had the right to choose—whatever name a human gave him, that was the name he would be stuck with.

“No need!” he grumbled eventually. “In this world, which yao would dare call me by my name?”

“Chong Ming, then.” Chen Xing smiled. “I’ll go with that. It’ll work.”[23]

Thus the phoenix received the name that would follow him for the next thousand-year cycle. He found it…passable.

“All set?” Feng Qianjun asked, walking quickly over to them. “The lookouts are in place. Xiang-ge should be making his move on Xifeng Bank within the next hour. Here, have some bread first.”

He and Feng Qianjun wove through the bustling market. “Chong Ming?” Chen Xing called, glancing over his shoulder. “Where’d you go?”

The phoenix had already vanished. Chen Xing looked around and spotted a golden-red bird perched on a rooftop. He figured the phoenix didn’t want to mingle too much with ordinary folk—maybe he even wanted to head off somewhere to secretly celebrate his cool new name—so Chen Xing let him be.

“What should we do next?” he asked Feng Qianjun.

Feng Qianjun wasn’t sure either. They ducked into an alley together to eat their bread. “I just think we need to make sure not to lose track of him. If he doesn’t show up soon, we’ll have to head to Longzhong Mountain and try to catch him there. But even if we do…what then? He’s not exactly the type to sit down for a nice chat.”

Chen Xing made a calming gesture. “I’ve got a plan. If you can’t think of a better one in the next little while, we’ll just go with mine.” Feng Qianjun nodded. Chen Xing thought for a moment, then explained. “Getting rid of Wang Ziye is our top priority. Chiyou comes after that. Our biggest advantage right now—besides having our powers back—is that Wang Ziye’s still in the dark, but we’re not. Last time, in Chang’an, we walked right into his trap. We can’t let that happen again. This time, we stay hidden.”

“Yes, yes, yes! Xiang-xiongdi’s plan last time was excellent.”

“So we’ll need to convince Xiang Shu again. I’ll handle that.”

“If anyone can do it, you can.”

Chen Xing nodded. “Like before, we’ll go to Chang’an, but this time we know where the Yin Yang Mirror is. Then we’ll steal it and take the Acala Blade… Hey! You! Wait! Please stop! Madam! It’s you! I remember

you! Wait! Stop the carriage! Let me get on and give your old master a quick acupuncture treatment. I guarantee he'll get better very soon…"

Chen Xing had noticed a passing carriage and quickly ran back out onto the street. It was the carriage that had brought him to Mai City the first time around, carrying the family of scholars with the man who had fainted in sorrow.

"I'll take a look at your family's old master," Chen Xing shouted enthusiastically. "He fainted, right?"

"Go away! We're looking for a real doctor!" the driver said.

"Ignore that swindler!" said the madam. "Go to a proper medical hall! Hurry!"

"Poor thing, give him some silver," the old lady said. "Things aren't easy for them these days."

"Mother! In this day and age, there are all kinds of riffraff running around. This guy's all smooth talk—you can tell he's up to no good!"

The carriage didn't stop. They'd taken Chen Xing's good intentions as malice. The driver raised the whip, ready to lash out at him, but Feng Qianjun stepped forward furiously and pulled Chen Xing away. They stepped aside, and the family drove off. Chen Xing watched them go, speechless.

"Forget them, just forget them," Feng Qianjun consoled him. "Let's not meddle in other people's business. Keep going. What's next? The Yin Yang Mirror?"

Resigned, Chen Xing stepped back and thought about it for a moment. "We'll get the Acala Blade from inside the mirror, give it to Xiang Shu, and then go to Chi Le Chuan to rescue Lu Ying."

"And the Soulfall Bell," Feng Qianjun added. "Or should we head south to Jiankang and get the Soulfall Bell first? With fast horses, it won't take more than five days to get to Kuaiji from here."

"The Soulfall Bell can wait, but the Yin Yang Mirror can't," Chen Xing said decisively. "Besides, once we get to Kuaiji, Xiang Shu will run off on his own."

Feng Qianjun's hometown was so close. In fact, when he'd first met Chen Xing he had been taking a shortcut from Jiankang. But he reluctantly nodded.

"The Soulfall Bell isn't urgent," Chen Xing insisted. "Once we get it, though, we can ambush Wang Ziye, follow the original plan to eliminate him, then go to the Fei River to dig Chiyou up and deal with him. By then, we'll have the Deer God, the phoenix, the magical artifacts, and Xie An…"

Feng Qianjun nodded again. "This plan sounds solid, but…you know what the hardest part will be."

He exchanged a glance with Chen Xing. They both knew the hardest part would be getting Xiang Shu to do as he was told. Of all of them, he was the most likely to go astray—and worse, Chen Xing didn't even know how Xiang Shu had found Chiyou in the end! All he knew was that Xiang Shu had vanished to go find Chiyou, then Huanmo Palace appeared and Xiang Shu had somehow became the Dinghai Pearl along the way, then Xiang Shu stabbed himself to death with an arrow that also killed the Demon God and his family—

"He's coming! He's coming!" Feng Qianjun stepped hastily in front of Chen Xing to shield him.

"Robbery!" shouted a passerby. "Someone's robbing the bank!"

"Leave it to me," Chen Xing said. "Just draw his attention! Go!"

Xiang Shu stepped out of the Dongzhe Bank carrying a sack of gold. Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing rushed out from the alley. "Brave warrior, please stop!" Feng Qianjun called out. "I have something to say!"

Then Xiang Shu shook the sack, and golden coins rained down like flower petals.

Feng Qianjun swiftly dodged while Chen Xing circled around to Xiang Shu's back. Moving in tandem, they closed in, and Chen Xing lunged at Xiang Shu and grabbed hold of his thigh.

Xiang Shu looked down at him, incredulous. He tried to turn and leave, but Chen Xing held fast. Even when Xiang Shu raised his leg, Chen Xing didn't let go. "Listen to me—Xiang Shu, don't run! Your legs are really long!"

The guards arrived, and the leading officer bellowed, “Seize them all!”

Xiang Shu grabbed Chen Xing by the collar, but Chen Xing tapped into hidden strength from some heretofore unknown reserve and refused to release him. In a desperate situation with no time to argue, Xiang Shu ran into an alley, dragging Chen Xing along.

“Don’t shoot! We’re just trying to uphold justice!” Feng Qianjun shouted at the guards.

Xiang Shu stared at both of them. Finally, sounding deeply frustrated, he yelled, “Let go!”

Chen Xing didn’t listen. Feng Qianjun covered their rear as they headed into the alley, and the three of them turned a corner and began to flee. There was a precarious moment where Xiang Shu nearly shook Chen Xing off, but Chen Xing quickly climbed back up his leg again—and accidentally brushed against something rather firm.

His eyes went huge. Xiang Shu pointedly said nothing. He was wearing thin silk martial pants, and Chen Xing, clinging tightly to one of his legs, nearly pulled his pants right off. The dog came running up from the side, barking and biting at Xiang Shu’s pant leg, but it couldn’t do anything to him. Just as Xiang Shu was about to hit Chen Xing, Feng Qianjun caught up, hollering, “This is your plan? It doesn’t seem to be working!”

The moment Xiang Shu laid eyes on Feng Qianjun, he’d known that this guy knew martial arts. He couldn’t use too much force on Chen Xing, but Feng Qianjun was a different story. With Chen Xing still hanging off his leg, he quickly spun around and assumed a fighting stance. Feng Qianjun instinctively tried to dodge, and Chen Xing used the momentum climb up Xiang Shu’s back, wrapping his arms around Xiang Shu’s shoulders and tightening his grip from behind.

“Kjera!” he said. “Are you looking for Kjera?”

Xiang Shu jolted and stopped in his tracks.

Outside of Mai City, one incense stick’s time later…

Chen Xing reached out to tug at Xiang Shu's hand, but Xiang Shu frowned and pulled away.

"Speak," Xiang Shu said coolly. "Who are you people?!"

At last, they could have a proper conversation with Xiang Shu. Chen Xing wiped the sweat from his brow as he pondered how to respond. He hadn't known much about Xiang Shu three years ago. Admittedly, he couldn't say he understood Xiang Shu well now, either, but he knew a few things, at least. Kjera, one of Wang Ziye's assumed identities, was a mystery Xiang Shu had been pursuing when they met. The sole reason he, the Great Chanyu, had left Chi Le Chuan was to find Wang Ziye.

"Exorcists," Chen Xing said finally. "As for our origins, I'll explain later. Feng-dage, how much time do we have left?"

Feng Qianjun looked up at the sky. "If we leave now, we should be able to reach Longzhong Mountain by late afternoon."

They had wasted a lot of time in Mai City the first time around, so they had a lot more time now. Chen Xing nodded. "We're investigating Kjera too."

Xiang Shu's expression grew serious. "As I thought. Who is he? Where is he? What are his intentions?"

Chen Xing had planned to tell him Wang Ziye's true identity, but he had a sudden thought: What if Xiang Shu charged straight back to Chang'an for revenge? Chen Xing couldn't reveal everything just yet. "We've found some clues about him. He might be at Longzhong Mountain right now. Why don't we go and check it out together? We can talk as we walk."

Feng Qianjun gave Chen Xing an approving look. This way, Xiang Shu wouldn't run off again.

Xiang Shu was only half convinced, but they'd mentioned Kjera's name; they had to know something. He was silent for a moment. Then he mounted his horse. Chen Xing turned and glanced around. The phoenix was nowhere to be seen, but it was likely following them.

"I'll go prepare some things," Feng Qianjun said. "Who knows when we'll get another chance to restock."

He was giving the two of them a chance to be alone.

Xiang Shu looked to the northern plains. The spring breeze was picking up, and the plains lay barren. Chen Xing brought his horse to a halt beside Xiang Shu, watching him intently, and Xiang Shu shifted a little. Chen Xing's gaze moved from him to his leg in the stirrup, and he thought about how he had clung to Xiang Shu's thigh earlier.

He was so thin back then, Chen Xing thought. It was a good thing he had brought medicine.

Xiang Shu seemed to be lost in thought. He caught Chen Xing watching him in his peripheral vision, and his own gaze moved to Chen Xing's leg. It had been bandaged after Chen Xing was struck by an arrow, but it had bled slightly when Xiang Shu dragged him through the streets. It was still hurting, and he was frowning a little in pain.

"Why are you looking for him?" Xiang Shu asked suddenly.

"He's a yaoguai," Chen Xing replied. "He can harness resentment and bring the dead back to life. I must eliminate him."

Xiang Shu frowned, but remained silent for a moment. Then he asked, "Why save me?"

Chen Xing's mind raced. He abandoned the idea of asking Xiang Shu to be his protector; bringing up anything but Kjera now would shatter the fragile trust they had just established. He quickly came up with an explanation. "We've been searching for him for a long time… Based on the route he might have taken when he fled, we guessed that you may have seen him, so…mm, we came to Xiangyang to find you."

Xiang Shu made a sound of acknowledgment, but he was eyeing Chen Xing suspiciously. He must have still had many questions, but he chose to accept Chen Xing's explanation for the time being.

Chen Xing's heart had been in his throat, but now it finally settled back down to where it belonged. He knew that Xiang Shu had to be very, very confused. After their three years of history together, Chen Xing understood Xiang Shu a little better than he once had; making Xiang Shu trust him again shouldn't be too hard. But…would he like Chen Xing again? Chen Xing thought uneasily about the bracelet Xiang Shu had left for him to find before they parted ways. He began to doubt whether Xiang

Shu had truly liked him in the first place, and a sudden sadness welled up inside him.

Xiang Shu noticed his change in mood. “Do you have a grudge against Kjera too?”

No, Chen Xing almost said, but he thought better of it and nodded. “Yes, he…made me lose many important people.”

Feng Qianjun returned with food and wine, and a questioning look in his eyes. Chen Xing signaled that everything was fine.

“I’ll lead the way,” said Feng Qianjun. He set off ahead of them, but not before shooting Chen Xing a look that told him to hurry and seduce Xiang Shu already.

As promised, Feng Qianjun walked ahead as they began their journey. Xiang Shu fell back to walk side by side with Chen Xing. “I really had no idea who you were at first,” Xiang Shu said. “Why didn’t you mention Kjera sooner? What are exorcists?”

“Well…it’s…uh…” As he spoke, Chen Xing winced slightly in pain. Then his brow furrowed as an idea struck him: The arrow wound on his thigh hadn’t healed yet. He could lean into that. “It’s…a profession…for eliminating yao. Sounds strange, doesn’t it?”

Xiang Shu looked at him skeptically. “Last night, you acted like a madman.”

Chen Xing grimaced. “Because…ow, it hurts, slow down…”

With Chen Xing playing up the pain, Xiang Shu had no choice but to slow down for him. He assessed Chen Xing’s injury with his gaze. “You don’t know martial arts.”

“Right. I’m very weak.”

“How did you make it into Xiangyang?”

Can’t you tell how much I’m hurting?! He frowned harder, leaning slightly toward Xiang Shu. “Ah…it really hurts… Huh? Why is Feng-dage so fast? He disappeared in the blink of an eye.”

Xiang Shu sighed. “Forget it. I’ll take you. At this rate, we won’t reach the mountains before dark.”

“No, no, that would cause you too much trouble. How could I impose on you?” Chen Xing said. When Xiang Shu glanced at him with a hint of impatience, though, Chen Xing added, “Thanks, then.” He climbed over onto Xiang Shu’s horse, settled behind him, and hugged him tightly around the waist, enjoying the warmth of his body.

The dog, seeing Chen Xing change positions, thought it was being abandoned and began to bark in distress. Xiang Shu glanced at it and appeared to remember something.

“Sorry, it shares the same name as you,” Chen Xing said quickly. “I didn’t notice. This is my dog. I lost it on the way to Xiangyang. I first met it under an oak tree, so I named it Xiang Shu. It wasn’t intentional.”[24]

“All right, all right!” Xiang Shu said impatiently. “Just give it a new name.”

Chen Xing laughed from behind him. “Why don’t you name it?”

“I’m no good at naming things.”

Chen Xing fell silent, and the dog gradually quieted down.

“You really don’t have any martial arts skills at all,” Xiang Shu muttered under his breath. At his level, he could tell immediately whether someone had practiced martial arts, and more than anything on this journey, he was surprised by Chen Xing’s complete lack of ability.

“Yeah, why?”

“You’re not from Xiangyang. How did you get into the city?” When Xiang Shu was escorted into Xiangyang, Fu Jian’s troops already had the city surrounded. It was inconceivable that a defenseless young man could sneak into a city surrounded on all sides at such a critical moment.

Chen Xing had no answer but the honest one. “By luck. My luck has always been good.”

Xiang Shu scoffed. “Good enough to get you hit by a stray arrow?”

“Yeah. I don’t know why, but my luck is suddenly gone.”

“Why did you enter Xiangyang?”

“To find you,” said Chen Xing, bewildered.

Xiang Shu stopped talking. Chen Xing's heart bloomed with joy at getting to ride with Xiang Shu along the wide road to Longzhong Mountain, with the spring breeze filling the fields.

Out of nowhere, Xiang Shu asked, "After you found me, how did you plan to get me out of Xiangyang? Did you not think about that?"

"Ah. I knew Feng-dage would help me," Chen Xing replied.

"Haven't you two only just reunited? How did you know he'd come rescue you in the nick of time? You clearly didn't have that factored in, otherwise you wouldn't have been so surprised to see him."

Chen Xing fell silent. Xiang Shu was extremely observant. From the way Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun acted when they met, he'd quickly deduced that they'd been separated for a long time—months or even years. Feng Qianjun definitely wasn't the one who'd brought Chen Xing into Xiangyang. Somehow, this hapless young man had entered Xiangyang alone and tricked Zhu Xu into releasing Xiang Shu, at which point he'd had to figure out how to get Xiang Shu safely out of the city.

It was a good thing Feng Qianjun had arrived when he did. For this boy, trying to escape Xiangyang alone with a man who was completely immobilized, right as the city was about to fall, would have been a death sentence.

But even knowing it was a suicide mission, he came to rescue Xiang Shu. What was he thinking?

Chapter 92

EVENTUALLY, Xiang Shu said, “Thank you for saving me.”

Chen Xing found himself surprised and a little overwhelmed by this. Xiang Shu wasn’t a feral dog, after all—he’d probably only been so curt when they first met because Chen Xing took the wrong approach with him. This thought gave Chen Xing more confidence.

“I don’t know why,” Xiang Shu said, turning his head, “but I keep getting this feeling that I’ve seen you somewhere before. Like in some kind of a dream.”

“I’ve dreamed of you too. Maybe we knew each other in our past lives, and we were destined to meet?” Chen Xing suggested.

Xiang Shu had no words. He’d spoken his actual thoughts and hadn’t meant anything by it, but Chen Xing’s response made the mood between them warm and ambiguous—especially with Chen Xing riding behind him, hugging his waist. They both felt suddenly awkward, and Chen Xing scooted back a little on the horse. Xiang Shu made no comment.

“You…” Chen Xing and Xiang Shu began at the same time.

Xiang Shu didn’t know why, but when they were alone, he felt an irresistible urge—almost a compulsion—to talk to Chen Xing. He kept wanting to turn his head back and look at him. “Is your arrow wound better? Should we find some medicine?”

“It’s all right. I’m actually also a doctor. How about you? Are you feeling any better?”

See, there’s nothing wrong with a married couple treating each other like honored guests, now, is there? Chen Xing thought. *Xiang Shu has become so gentle he’s actually showing concern for me.*

Xiang Shu had, with his own eyes, seen Chen Xing take an arrow in an attempt to save him; of course he felt a sense of responsibility.

Chen Xing had been used to having Sui Xing’s protection—and he’d also gotten used to Xiang Shu ensuring his safety at all times. Essentially,

he had never been injured. Looking back, he didn't know if he owed that to the good luck Sui Xing brought him or to having found Xiang Shu, who protected him so well. There'd been so many times he was in danger and Xiang Shu stepped in front of him to shield him, without fail… Thinking about it was very moving.

"What medicine did you give me?" Xiang Shu asked. "Take some yourself."

"There's no more," Chen Xing said honestly. "Shifu only gave me the one pill."

"Where is your shifu's residence located? Is it far?"

"Shifu's dead. That medicine was passed down to me a long time ago."

A medicinal pill that could bring someone back from the brink of death—Xiang Shu knew how valuable such a thing was, and he understood the price that Chen Xing had paid to save him.

"You were locked up in prison for such a long time. You're still a little weak," Chen Xing added. "You should eat a little more over the next few days. Look at how skinny you are now."

Xiang Shu didn't say any more.

In the gorge that led into Longzhong Mountain, the three of them stopped for a short rest. When Feng Qianjun returned from scouting out the road ahead of them, he saw that Xiang Shu had found some herbs and was rubbing them into pieces in his hand. He then used his inner force to warm the medicine up before applying it to Chen Xing's arrow wound.

He didn't utter a single word from the beginning to the end, and when he saw Feng Qianjun coming, he rose and went to the stream to wash his hands.

"Everything all right?" Feng Qianjun asked. Chen Xing nodded, a smile in his gaze, and Feng Qianjun lowered his voice. "He's forgotten you, but he hasn't forgotten his attraction to you. See, when you were hugging his thigh, that thing was even—"

"Stop!" Chen Xing said. "Just…shut up."

Feng Qianjun patted Chen Xing's shoulder and turned his head to look at Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu washed the herbs off his hands, but he didn't come back over to them. Instead, he sat silently at the side of the creek.

"Hurry up," Feng Qianjun added quietly. "You'd better get a move on and make him submit! Get in bed with him, then you'll be set. Whatever medicines you need, feel free to tell your Feng-dage! Do you need any hehuan powder[25]? Should I go to Chang'an and find some for you?"

"Why don't we discuss something else?" Chen Xing whispered back. "Princess Qinghe and Gu Qing-jie, for example. What are you planning to do about them? Ooh, just thinking about it makes me shiver."

As expected, Feng Qianjun shut his mouth and rose to leave.

After Feng Qianjun left, Xiang Shu got up and came back. He glanced over at Chen Xing, and Chen Xing said, "I'm fine. Let's just go."

Xiang Shu had noticed the dynamic between them, where Feng Qianjun listened to Chen Xing's words and acted somewhat like a subordinate, yet also like a friend. He glanced at Feng Qianjun with a hint of doubt, but didn't inquire further.

"Feng-dage is also an exorcist," Chen Xing explained, of his own accord. "We've known each other forever."

"Hmm," Xiang Shu replied.

The three of them led their horses along the intact plank road through Longzhong Mountain until they came to the place where Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun had made camp the first time around.

"Is this the place?" Chen Xing asked, taking in their surroundings.

Feng Qianjun nodded. He shot a glance at the two of them, then pointed toward the high ground, indicating he was going to go scout again. Along the way, Chen Xing had given Xiang Shu the general gist of the situation with Shi Hai, the existence of drought fiends, and the hidden peril looming over the Divine Land.

"The blood of the Demon God," Xiang Shu said, recalling the medicinal vial and its contents that Kjera had made his father drink.

“That small amount of blood can cause living people to transform. You…” Chen Xing almost slipped up but thankfully caught himself in time. “What was the situation the last time you saw him?”

Still lost in his own memories, Xiang Shu didn’t respond to Chen Xing. “What are we doing here right now?” he asked.

“Waiting. We’re waiting for the sun to set. After nightfall, we’ll head to another spot to block his path first, then stop him if he’s in the vicinity.”

“You know where he is?” Xiang Shu asked suspiciously.

Chen Xing nodded. “We cannot startle him, otherwise he might escape at any point. Please, no matter what, *please* follow my command. I’ll take the time explain everything afterward.”

“Watch out for yourself.” Xiang Shu was clearly suspicious of Chen Xing, who had no skill in martial arts to speak of.

“I may not have any martial arts,” Chen Xing said after a moment’s thought, “but I have other ways. You’ll have to believe in me.” This time round, he was determined to catch that masked figure and thus put a halt to Sima Wei’s reanimation. If the enemy managed to escape, Wang Ziye would immediately know that exorcists had appeared.

“Got it.”

Once again, Chen Xing realized, Xiang Shu was putting aside the questions he still had and choosing to believe Chen Xing for the time being.

Moments later, Feng Qianjun returned carrying a body, which he tossed to the ground. It was the body of the soldier that Xiang Shu had discovered in the first cycle.

“A Jin soldier,” Xiang Shu muttered to himself.

“We have to burn it,” said Feng Qianjun. “If it’s returned to Mai City, the plague caused by the drought fiends will spread.”

Chen Xing ignited the Heart Lamp in his palm, and Xiang Shu immediately turned to look at him. Chen Xing pressed his hand against the corpse’s forehead—though this time, the effect was different. When the Heart Lamp lit up, the resentment in the corpse slowly dissipated and seeped out, like snow melting under a hot sun.

“Rest in peace,” he said quietly.

Chen Xing’s entire body was enveloped in warm light; he looked as if the Heart Lamp had taken human form, and his expression held the solemnity and compassion of a god. As the body’s resentment was exorcised, glittering specks of light floated up to the heavens to be absorbed by the divine veins, letting the soul reenter samsara.

Xiang Shu looked at Chen Xing with pure astonishment. Then the light receded, and Chen Xing was his normal self again.

“We still ought to burn it,” said Feng Qianjun, lighting a torch, “just to make sure nothing unexpected happens. There are still a few hours until the sky gets fully dark, so rest for a while, both of you; we’ll move out together soon.”

Chen Xing yawned. Counting from the night before yesterday, he had been awake for more than two days straight. “I need to sleep for a bit,” he said wearily.

For some reason—he didn’t know why—this made Xiang Shu tense. “You’ll be okay, right? That was magic? It makes you tired?”

Chen Xing waved his hand. “I’m truly just sleepy.”

With that, he curled up beside Xiang Shu in a spot where the sunlight wouldn’t reach. The little dog came over and snuggled into Chen Xing’s embrace. Xiang Shu paused for a moment, thinking, and then he too lay down beside Chen Xing, turning his head to gaze at Chen Xing’s soundly sleeping, innocent face.

At twilight, Feng Qianjun brought out the food and even some wine, and Chen Xing yawned and rose.

“Come,” Feng Qianjun said, “let’s celebrate Xiang-xiongdi’s successful escape and everyone…gaining a second chance at life!”

Chen Xing was worried that slip of the tongue would arouse Xiang Shu’s suspicions again, but Xiang Shu just stared at the cup in his hand, nodded, and drank the wine. When the sun sank below the horizon, Feng Qianjun handed a sword to Xiang Shu, and the three of them entered the

forest, following the small path toward the road where the masked figure had revived Sima Wei.

This was the last day to revive Sima Wei. Unlike last time, when it had been close to the time when the cocks crowed before Chen Xing had an inkling of what was happening, now Chen Xing had enough of a grasp on the situation to take the masked stranger by surprise.

"Did you raise that bird?" Xiang Shu asked out of the blue.

"What?" Chen Xing was bemused for a while before he realized that Xiang Shu was referring to Chong Ming. *He's found out about that too?* Chen Xing hadn't even noticed that Chong Ming was still following them. "Well…life's short and the story's long. It's more complicated than we have time for right now. When we have time, I'll explain it to you. It's a yao, but for the moment, it's harmless."

They stopped outside of the village. With the sun almost entirely below the horizon, their surroundings were dead silent, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Then Xiang Shu tensed—he'd spotted some living corpses beginning to wander outside the village. Feng Qianjun, inured to the sight of drought fiends by now, moved in silently to set up an ambush. Xiang Shu hefted his sword and was about to leave when Chen Xing caught his wrist.

"Shhh. We'll take care of those later. Wait here a bit longer," Chen Xing told him.

The sacrificial altar stood in the center of the graveyard, just like before. The light was dim, and Chen Xing and Xiang Shu hid on one side while Feng Qianjun hid on the other. They knew better than to burn the corpses in the graveyard first, as it would alert the enemy to their presence.

Chen Xing grabbed Xiang Shu's wrist and observed him earnestly. "In a bit, I'll give you the power of the Heart Lamp. It'll be up to you to defeat the enemy's leader…"

As he spoke, their eyes met, and in that instant, a wave of warm light manifested between them. Chen Xing was amazed. *So the Heart Lamp's still in Xiang Shu's body. Great!*

It had taken barely any energy for Chen Xing to awaken the fragment of light in Xiang Shu's heart meridian; it was as if some strange resonance had occurred between their bodies. Xiang Shu lowered his head, looking at his own wrist where Chen Xing's left hand was pressed against it. The instant their skin touched, his breathing quickened, and the light shone from Chen Xing's right hand, spiraling up the back of Xiang Shu's own.

The sword in his hand reacted to the Heart Lamp's resonance and took up a brilliant white glow. And that wasn't the last of it: Xiang Shu's entire body underwent a change. The gilded white robe of the Protector Martial God manifested faintly around him, and a golden light shone from between his brows.

"And then?" Xiang Shu asked. He had yet to notice the change; he sensed only that Chen Xing's magic was profound.

Chen Xing stared, dumbfounded, at Xiang Shu. Then an abashed smile came over his face. The light disappeared, and the space between them returned to darkness. "And then nothing. This light can defeat him. It's all up to you now. I'll support you."

Xiang Shu gave a single nod.

Chen Xing turned around and sat down in front of a tombstone, trying to calm his racing heart, but he couldn't resist turning his head to look at Xiang Shu again. It was too dark for him to see Xiang Shu's reaction, but the hand holding his didn't loosen. That only made his heart race harder.

Surrounded by the darkness, Xiang Shu was silent, thinking, until deep into the night, when Chen Xing yawned again and dozed off against him.

Feng Qianjun fumbled his way over to them in the dark, hunched over. "Why isn't anything happening?"

Chen Xing didn't know. He was growing less and less sure of himself. Perhaps it'd happened during the third watch instead?

"He will come," Xiang Shu insisted.

"And how do you know?" Feng Qianjun asked.

“I can’t explain it,” said Xiang Shu in the all-encompassing darkness, “but I feel as if tonight’s events have happened before in a dream.”

When Feng Qianjun left, Chen Xing yawned again. He leaned a little closer into Xiang Shu’s side and reached out to feel for him, touching the back of Xiang Shu’s hand. Xiang Shu thought he was afraid, so he gave Chen Xing’s hand a squeeze to assure him that he was still there.

Joy blossomed in Chen Xing’s heart. *This is so intimate, ahhh! Why wasn’t it like this last time? All we did was piss each other off on purpose!*

Around midnight, a strange change occurred in the graveyard. Black qi began to rise, and the three of them turned as one to watch anxiously from behind the tombstone.

Feng Qianjun waved his hand. Peeking over, Chen Xing found that Xiang Shu was extremely tense, his brow furrowed deeply as he clutched his longsword.

A figure wearing a black robe approached the sacrificial altar. With a flick of his hands, he enveloped the altar in black fog, which swirled and revealed an armor-clad body. A stream of black qi began to pour from the robed figure’s hands and into Sima Wei’s corpse.

Chen Xing used his hand to signal: *Three, two, one…*

The three of them showed themselves at the same time. “You bastards,” yelled Feng Qianjun, “who go around everywhere digging up ancestral graves—”

“Just die!” Chen Xing shouted.

Xiang Shu could see that the man wasn’t Kjera, but he still wasn’t about to let him get away. He leaped onto a tombstone with a single step and launched himself toward the altar, letting out an angry shout. His longsword whirled, transforming into an arc of light.

That masked man was completely shocked. He leaped into the air and hovered there. “Who’s there?!” he spat.

“None of your business.” With quick steps, Chen Xing walked onto the altar. The masked man spread his arms, releasing thick, roiling

resentment to continue controlling Sima Wei, but Chen Xing lifted his hand and, with a shoving motion, shot him with the Heart Lamp's light.

The Heart Lamp instantly broke the masked man's control over Sima Wei. Chen Xing seized this opportunity to press one hand against Sima Wei's not-yet-reanimated chest and begin exorcising the black qi.

The masked man, named Zhou Yi, was Wang Ziye's trusted subordinate. When he saw the resentment that he'd spent the last forty-nine days painstakingly accumulating was being exorcised, he flew into a rage and swooped down to attack. Claws outstretched, he aimed for Chen Xing's head.

"Watch out!" cried Feng Qianjun—he'd leaped up onto a stone pillar to ambush him only to see that bastard pouncing at Chen Xing. He knew he couldn't reach them in time. But Xiang Shu was already sprinting over from the side, pulling out his sword.

The sword's blade shone with an intense light. Zhou Yi shrieked in pain as Xiang Shu lopped his arm clean off and sent him flying back into the sky.

Xiang Shu stood protectively in front of Chen Xing as he spun his longsword in a circle. "Where is Kjera?" he demanded coldly.

Zhou Yi, still hovering in midair, was both astonished and enraged. His voice was grim. "You actually—"

"Drag him down!" Chen Xing shouted.

Feng Qianjun readied his saber, but before he could swing it resentment flooded out like a wave from beneath Zhou Yi's robes and exploded outward. It was a great mass of resentment, collected from all of the citizens who had died in the Jingzhou area and at the great Battle of Xiangyang. Every coffin in the graveyard opened, and hundreds of drought fiends climbed out.

"I'll go take care of them," said Feng Qianjun. "I'm leaving this place to you two!"

He somersaulted back into the graveyard, where he spun the Harmony Saber in a circle with both hands, and a frenzy of thorny vines and plants burst out of the ground around them. The surrounding forest

trembled as tree roots rose from the ground and whipped toward the center of the graveyard.

“Don’t pay it any attention,” Chen Xing told the astonished Xiang Shu. “That’s his magic. We have to defeat this guy!”

He pressed his hand down on Sima Wei’s chest to inject the Heart Lamp’s light into the corpse. As he continued to exorcise the resentment, though, he sensed a drop of the Demon God’s Blood near Sima Wei’s heart meridian, resisting his invasion.

“Exorcists?” Zhou Yi hissed in a voice like ice.

The resentment exploded again, this time congealing into a black fog. Suddenly, Zhou Yi appeared from the fog, dagger in hand. He tried again and again to stab at Chen Xing, but Xiang Shu was faster and parried each attack with his sword: *Ding! Ding! Ding!*

“Not bad!” Zhou Yi exclaimed.

When it came down to it, though, Xiang Shu’s weapon was not of the same quality as the Acala Blade. The last stab from Zhou Yi’s dagger broke the sword with a sharp metallic clank.

“Hang in there a little longer!” Chen Xing called out.

“I can’t see!” Feng Qianjun yelled. He was wielding the Saber of Harmony and Life, using the plants to trap the horde of drought fiends, but the black fog had obscured his vision. “It’s too dark! Can you give me some light?”

“Don’t speak!” shouted Xiang Shu.

Zhou Yi vanished back into the black fog. “Even today,” he said grimly, “there are exorcists…”

Then, inside the fog, they heard the sound of an arrow being drawn back on a bow. Chen Xing sensed danger, certain that someone had locked onto his position, but when Xiang Shu stepped in front of him with his broken sword, that sense of danger vanished without a trace. Still, Chen Xing feared that if Zhou Yi loosed his arrow from within the black fog Xiang Shu would have no way to block, so for now he withdrew the power that he was injecting into Sima Wei’s body. He pulled the Heart Lamp’s

power back into his right palm and raised his glowing hand to exorcise the resentment.

Light exploded from his palm to illuminate the entire mountain, lighting up sky and ground alike as if it were high noon on the year's brightest day. Feng Qianjun, Zhou Yi, and even Chen Xing himself all cried out loudly at once, and Feng Qianjun hollered, "It's too bright! I'm blind!"

A succession of roosters crowed across the mountain, thinking day had dawned. Chen Xing's vision swam with white afterimages; he had forgotten to close his eyes and made himself dizzy with his own flash. Luckily, Xiang Shu had been facing away from him, clutching the hilt of the broken sword with both hands as he bent his body.

The resentment was no match for the Heart Lamp, and an instant later, the Heart Lamp's light was absorbed by Xiang Shu's body. Though Chen Xing's vision was blurry, he saw Xiang Shu take on the appearance of the Protector Martial God. Suddenly, he was wearing a snow-white battle robe with armor that covered half his body. Cloud-treading boots adorned his feet, and on his wrists he wore golden vambraces engraved with coiling dragons. Tiny wings of light appeared at his temples, and the broken sword in his hand lengthened into a longsword that shone with the brilliance of a thousand golden rays. Behind his back, drooping wings shook themselves out, leaving afterimages of golden lightning that arced across the sky. He drew the sword down in a slash that only narrowly missed the still-airborne Zhou Yi.

Zhou Yi knew then that he was sorely outmatched. He transformed into black fire and flew north, leaving Sima Wei behind.

"Don't let him escape!" Chen Xing shouted, but he needn't have said anything; Xiang Shu was way ahead of him. He caught up to Zhou Yi effortlessly and flicked his sword at him from behind, slicing open the black robe and cleaving Zhou Yi's body, which was made up of resentment, in two.

Zhou Yi let out a pitiful cry as he burned away to nothingness in that fiery glow. "How has this light once again—"

"What you should be curious about," Chen Xing remarked, tilting his head up to watch the resentment dissipate, "is why you just said 'again.'"

Xiang Shu turned in midair and landed back on the ground. He looked at Chen Xing as he walked toward them, his brow furrowed deeply and his body still bathed in light. Chen Xing looked back dumbly, feeling as though he were watching a staunch yet benevolent martial god walk out of the very light and winds of creation.

As soon as Chen Xing deactivated the Heart Lamp, Xiang Shu returned to his original state, and their surroundings were plunged into darkness once more. The graveyard was full of drought fiends, trapped in tangled vines.

“Why do I feel like this has happened before?” Xiang Shu asked, sounding confused. Chen Xing, lost in thought, didn’t respond.

“What should we do with Sima Wei?” asked Feng Qianjun from off to one side. “Hurry up! Solve this problem! Don’t just stand there staring off into space!”

Chen Xing remembered what he was going to do. He gestured to Xiang Shu that he would answer him later, and focused his attention on exorcising the resentment in Sima Wei’s body. Under the power of the Heart Lamp, the resentment surged, then burned away. Once again, roosters began to crow.

“The sky’s light again already?” Chen Xing asked, surprised.

Xiang Shu approached the front of the altar and lowered his head to look at Sima Wei’s corpse where it lay on the platform. “This is the drought fiend that Kjera wants to revive?”

“Well, this man seems to be a Prince of Jin…”

“Sima Wei,” Xiang Shu supplied flatly.

Chen Xing blinked. “You remembered… Um, how did you know that?”

Xiang Shu motioned to the tombstone, where Sima Wei’s name was written as plain as day.

Well, Chen Xing thought. Aloud, he said, “We need to bury him again and burn the rest of the drought fiends here before we can leave.”

Suddenly, though, Sima Wei’s corpse twitched. Xiang Shu moved quickly, grabbing Chen Xing’s shoulder and pushing him behind himself so

that he could protect him. Feng Qianjun jumped and looked at Chen Xing, but Chen Xing hadn't expected this either. Sima Wei was moving! What was going on?! Hadn't they already stopped the entire revival process?

Sima Wei writhed on the slab. Xiang Shu made to pull out his sword, but Chen Xing said, "Wait. Let's see his condition first."

Slowly, Sima Wei rose to a sitting position. He took off his helmet, revealing clouded eyes and a grayish-white complexion.

"What…is this place?" he asked slowly. "And who…am I?"

Chapter 93

THEY WERE OUTSIDE Longzhong Mountain now, on the side of the military road, and the sun was high in the sky. Sima Wei's revival had evidently left his thoughts a jumble.

"How about we tie him up and take our time interrogating him?" Feng Qianjun suggested. Sima Wei blinked.

"He has no reason to attack us, so there shouldn't be any danger, right?" said Chen Xing. "I think we'll be fine even if he isn't tied up. We have Xiang Shu with us, and he can't beat Xiang Shu."

Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing, but didn't say anything.

"Hey, Sima Wei, where's Chiyou?" Feng Qianjun asked. "What are Kjera's weaknesses? And your drought fiend king brothers, where are they all hiding?"

Xiang Shu, who was standing at Chen Xing's side and watching this unfold, finally came to the end of his patience with them. He frowned. "He doesn't know anything right now, nor could he know anything. He obviously has no way to answer your questions."

Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun both saw Sima Wei as the same drought fiend king who had been under Shi Hai's command. Xiang Shu's common sense showed them how foolish they were being, and they realized they had forgotten a crucial fact: Sima Wei had just been revived. He hadn't even come into contact with Shi Hai's underlings yet; how on earth could he know about the enemy's plans? Sima Wei was in a confused state of mind—he'd been dead and then someone had come out of nowhere and revived him out of the blue. No wonder he was staring so quizzically at the three of them.

"Then what should we do?" asked Feng Qianjun. "Burn him?"

"What? No!" Chen Xing said. "He hasn't done anything bad! Not being allowed rest peacefully after death is bad enough, and now you want to burn him too?"

“That’s right. That way he can return to his eternal rest. Isn’t that a good thing? What better ideas do you have?”

Xiang Shu watched them both from the side, paying special attention to every move Chen Xing made. Sima Wei turned in a circle a couple of times, then took a few steps away and ducked his head to look at the flowers on the side of the road. He plucked a single flower, brought it to his face, and tentatively sniffed it.

“Shouldn’t we let him decide?” Chen Xing said. “If he wants to keep living, then…”

Sima Wei turned his head back and glanced at the three of them.

“Sima Wei, what do you think?” Chen Xing asked earnestly.

“I don’t know,” said Sima Wei. “The only thing I remember clearly is that I am dead.” His last memory was the day on which Jia Nanfeng had ordered his execution.[26]

Chen Xing was at a bit of a loss. “We’re still very busy, and we can’t wait here for you to make up your mind. How about…you go live on your own? But you must not harm anyone.”

He studied Sima Wei. He didn’t show any signs of aggression. A drought fiend led a very strange kind of existence. If Chen Xing were to classify drought fiends as yaoguai, then this sort of drought fiend, at least, was probably the innocuous kind of yao; they were clearheaded yao who retained their rationality. Unlike birds and beasts, they did not need to eat, so they didn’t even commit the Buddhist crime of killing living things. They only needed to take in the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth to perform their own cultivation.

Xiang Shu watched Sima Wei for a long time, apparently also trying to assess whether he held any aggression toward them. “He’s different from any of the drought fiends I’ve seen before.”

“Maybe it’s because of the Heart Lamp?” Chen Xing suggested. “He’s been influenced by the Heart Lamp and has maintained his humanity, so maybe he’s a virtuous sort of drought fiend.”

“You cannot go anywhere where there are humans,” Feng Qianjun added to Sima Wei. “We don’t know if you’ll spread the plague.”

Sima Wei nodded, but Chen Xing interrupted. “He shouldn’t be able to spread it. The plague was caused by the Demon God’s Blood, and his body doesn’t have any Demon God’s Blood in it anymore.” Just to be sure, he checked one more time. It was true: The only thing left in Sima Wei’s heart meridian was that single ember from the Heart Lamp.

“I want to follow you all,” Sima Wei said. “Where are you going?”

This…was unexpected. Chen Xing had really put his foot in it. Should they bring Sima Wei to Chang’an? If they did, where would they hide him? If he was discovered by Wang Ziye, wouldn’t he just cause them more problems?

But they could take time to figure out how to resolve any of those issues, and Chen Xing really felt for Sima Wei. He might, in this moment, have been the only one of his kind in the world.

Chen Xing turned back to look at Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun. “Do you guys have any problem with that?”

Feng Qianjun made a gesture that said the decision was Chen Xing’s to make. Xiang Shu had no opinion either. “I’ll go with whatever you decide,” he said.

“You can come, then,” Chen Xing told Sima Wei. “But you have to do as I say.”

Sima Wei nodded, his expression not changing a bit.

“Then…what’s our next step after this?” Chen Xing asked. He and Feng Qianjun had agreed that they would go to Chang’an, but he didn’t know how they would get Xiang Shu to believe that these plans weren’t just a random whim. He needed to find an excuse.

Xiang Shu was still holding the mask that Zhou Yi had dropped, turning it over and over in his hands. “Even if this masked man isn’t Kjera’s underling, he must have a connection to him,” he said.

“Yes.” Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun nodded in unison.

Xiang Shu pondered deeply. “They could be hiding somewhere.”

“That’s true,” Chen Xing agreed.

“At the end of the fight, I saw the bastard flee northwest.”

“Northwest, hmm… Then why don’t we check in Chang’an?”

Feng Qianjun slapped his thigh, as if this was a brilliant idea. “Sounds good! My big brother’s in Chang’an—we can ask for news from him!”

They both pretended to agree on this ingenious, spontaneous proposal.

“I, too, want to go back to Chang’an,” said Sima Wei.

Chen Xing patted Sima Wei, stroked the dog’s head, and glanced at the red-gold phoenix, which was perched on a parasol tree in the distance and grooming its feathers. Then he looked toward the vast spiritual qi flow moving through the world.

Their party had grown even larger. Now his companions numbered two people, one bird, one drought fiend, and one dog.

“Onward, then!” said Chen Xing, filled with confidence. “To Chang’an!”

The huge demon heart hung underground in Huanmo Palace. All around it, the earth veins acted as blood vessels, routing resentment toward the heart.

He couldn’t explain why, but for the past few days, Chiyou had felt that something wasn’t right. At some point, something had changed radically—but he had no idea what. Everything seemed to be as it ought. Whence came this ominous foreboding, this sense of looming misfortune? He, Chiyou, was made of misfortune; he was the god of it. How could misfortune come to the god of misfortune?

Wang Ziye approached the sacrificial altar and placed before it a long strip wrapped in yellow cloth. “In the span of a single night,” he said, astonishment plain in his voice, “all magic was revived. I can’t explain it. My lord, what do you think?”

“Something must have happened in some place you do not know of,” replied Chiyou’s voice.

“What can we do now that the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth has recovered? In time, all yao will awaken, and the human realm will—”

Chiyou cut him off with a wild bellow of laughter. “Even if the exorcists were here, what could they do?”

Wang Ziye was still reeling from the shock of the change. In the past few days, he had checked time and time again, and each time confirmed that magic had fully returned to the mortal realm. That meant that the Dinghai Pearl had been found, and the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth had been released from it. That wasn’t his greatest source of worry, however; what worried him most was that it had all occurred without any warning whatsoever.

“Who managed to break the Dinghai Pearl without dropping the slightest hint that it would happen?” Wang Ziye asked. “This doesn’t make any sense, my lord!”

“That is irrelevant,” Chiyou’s voice replied. “Whoever it is, they will come to us of their own accord, and soon. You must make your preparations in advance of their arrival. You know precisely what they want.”

When Zhou Yi died, Wang Ziye and Chiyou had sensed it immediately. After all, Zhou Yi was the disciple upon whom Wang Ziye relied the most. He had followed Wang Ziye for decades and had refined his physical form to complete nothingness—and somehow he’d vanished in a single night. Their enemy was unexpectedly strong. Wang Ziye couldn’t help his great alarm.

Barely managing to keep his emotions in check, he stepped forward and unwrapped the yellow cloth from around the long object he’d set down. “Well, every cloud has a silver lining. With the return of spiritual qi, I have been able to harness the last traces of energy from Xiang Yuyan’s soul in the Soulfall Bell. I used that energy to circumvent the defensive walls inside the Yin Yang Mirror and obtain the Acala Blade.”

After the Silence of All Magic, Zhang Liu had set down a protective barrier and left the Acala Blade in the Exorcism Department, in the mirror world’s Chang’an. Wang Ziye had found it three hundred years ago and been displeased to discover that the defensive walls around the artifact had been influenced by the artifact’s nature. The Acala Blade was a divine weapon used to exterminate demons and exorcise resentment; Wang Ziye, who cultivated resentment, couldn’t touch it. But now that the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth had returned, Wang Ziye had been able to use

some spiritual qi to trick the defensive walls and retrieve the Acala Blade from the mirror realm; now he could present it to Chiyou.

The heart gave off a red glow. “The Acala Blade, hm? That is the one thing in this world that We fear. Now that it is in Our possession, nothing in this world can harm Us. Wang Ziye, you have done very well.”

A single drop of crimson blood dripped from the Demon God’s heart and landed on the Acala Blade. It sank in, and the Acala Blade began to glow red.

“Fortunately, this sword has not recognized another owner since Xiang Yuyan’s death,” Wang Ziye said. “If we begin refining it now, it won’t be too late.”

The nine characters on the sword’s body faded, replaced by serpentine trails of the Demon God Chiyou’s blood, curling in strange patterns. Resentment coiled around the sword and began to flow into it. As the Demon God’s Blood flooded the Acala Blade, the last bit of light dimmed from it.

Then the sword transformed into a pitch-black spear that emanated resentment. Chiyou let out a loud, hideous laugh. “Once We have finished refining the Acala Blade, We shall never be defeated again!”

But even as he laughed and laughed, even Chiyou, the Demon God, could not shake that hint of foreboding. He and Wang Ziye alike felt a complicated mix of emotions in their hearts.

Night, on the road to Chang’an, in an abandoned village.

As usual, Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun were sharing one room. Sima Wei was outside, staring off into the distance. The little dog was fast asleep, and the phoenix had gone off to who knew where. Lying on the ruined bed, Chen Xing counted the days off on his fingers.

“We’ll make it,” Feng Qianjun said, reentering the room and lying down. “Last time, if it hadn’t been for us barging in, my big brother would probably have waited an extra few days.”

Chen Xing mumbled an agreement, but he couldn’t shake the sense of foreboding that was nagging at him. The Yin Yang Mirror was still in

Feng Qianyi's hands, so they had to regain both it and the Acala Blade as quickly as possible, all without attracting Wang Ziye's attention. Chen Xing wouldn't be able to relax until they had it.

"You're not going to keep Xiang-xiongdi company?" Feng Qianjun asked.

"I'll pass," Chen Xing said, though in truth, he kept thinking about Xiang Shu. He wanted more than anything to go seek him out. "He's forgotten everything."

"He still remembers you. He may have forgotten that you two were together before, but he definitely still remembers that feeling. Just look into his eyes; the eyes are the window to the soul, and his are the same as before. Every moment of every day, he's paying attention to you."

Chen Xing blew up. "That's because we just met! He's scrutinizing me because he doesn't trust us yet! Feng-dage, please, don't make something out of nothing. We're going to have to do everything over again, and if something goes wrong and he doesn't like me in the end, I'll…" He trailed off with a frustrated sound.

This was what Feng Qianjun feared too. It was why he'd been keeping his distance from Chen Xing on the journey, to prevent Xiang Shu from thinking that they were in some sort of unspeakable relationship. "All right," he said quickly, "then from here on out, I'll pretend that I don't know a thing."

As Chen Xing mulled it over, he took a stealthy peek out the window, but he didn't see Xiang Shu. He didn't know if Xiang Shu had gone to sleep yet. After some tossing and turning, he rose and went outside.

Under the moonlight, he saw Xiang Shu bathing in a small stream. He had recovered quickly; it had been mere days since his rescue from this prison, and already he was faring much better. The creek water trickled down his bare upper half, highlighting the sleek, graceful, pronounced lines of his muscles; everything was just so.

Next to the stream, there were a few rustling noises as Chen Xing approached. Xiang Shu knew that he was there, but he neither turned nor spoke. After a moment, Chen Xing stripped until he, too, wore only a pair

of inner pants, and he hopped in from the bank, splashing Xiang Shu with cold water.

“Ah! It’s so cold!”

As soon as Chen Xing hit the water, he scrambled for the shore again, but Xiang Shu caught him and tripped him with one foot. Chen Xing shouted wildly, and Xiang Shu finally let him stand up straight again. Chen Xing shivered a little, and Xiang Shu turned to wipe his own arms as if he had been wholly uninvolved in what had just happened.

The water didn’t seem quite so cold anymore, Chen Xing discovered. He scooted a little closer to Xiang Shu and confirmed it: The water near him felt just a little bit warmer.

Xiang Shu turned his silent gaze on him.

“Cold,” Chen Xing explained, still shivering. The beginning of spring was always chilly, and he was practically frozen stiff.

With swift movements, Xiang Shu helped Chen Xing onto the shore and handed him a cloth to dry off with. Chen Xing leaned, shivering, against him. Xiang Shu steadied him to stop him from moving as he mopped the water from Chen Xing’s lower half. Then he picked up Chen Xing’s robe, piled his own robe on top of it, and wrapped them both around Chen Xing’s body.

“Th-thanks.” With this, Chen Xing finally started to warm back up.

Xiang Shu’s gaze had a tinge of ironic amusement to it; Chen Xing was clearly afraid of the cold, yet he still came in to bathe. Xiang Shu turned and walked toward their camp. His pants, having been soaked through, had grown near-transparent, revealing his long, gorgeous, shapely legs, and the fabric clung enough to outline the contours of his leg muscles as he walked.

When he came to their campfire, he sat down in front of it, pulled out a dagger, placed a mat across his legs, and set about adding things to the pot of water hanging over the fire. Chen Xing couldn’t see it clearly, but when he caught the smell of ginger, he guessed that they were herbs to ward off the chill. Once the water had boiled, Xiang Shu dug around in Feng Qianjun’s belongings and found a few chunks of sugar. He put the sugar

and some of the soup into a broken bowl, which he then picked up casually and handed to Chen Xing.

“Shouldn’t you drink some as well?” Chen Xing asked.

“I’m not afraid of the cold,” Xiang Shu replied. “Your body is too weak.”

Bundled up in both of their clothes, Chen Xing drank a bit of the ginger soup. His body warmed, and he shot Xiang Shu a contemplative glance. Their eyes met briefly before Xiang Shu turned away, avoiding his gaze.

A luminous moon hung in the sky, immeasurably bright, illuminating Chen Xing and the half-naked Xiang Shu in front of the campfire. Everything around them was calm and quiet.

“The moon is beautiful tonight,” Xiang Shu said suddenly.

What a thing to hear from Xiang Shu’s mouth. Chen Xing smiled. “It’s the fifteenth of the second month.”

Xiang Shu seemed lost in his own memories. “In the prison in Xiangyang,” he went on a moment later, “I could only see a little bit of light. I couldn’t see the full moon or the sun, but some nights, the moon was very bright. I believed that I wouldn’t live to see a moon like this one again.”

He had, Chen Xing recalled, only been trying to investigate the truth of everything he was tangled up in when he was wrongfully captured by the Jin soldiers and taken back to Xiangyang. Chen Xing couldn’t help the surge of guilt that he felt at that. “Sorry.”

Xiang Shu shot him a confused frown.

“For my own people to have treated you that way makes me feel very ashamed.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Xiang Shu said, taken aback. His intent had not been to express his hatred toward the Han people; Chen Xing had misunderstood. “Forget it. Did they tell you how many people I killed?” Since they had already gotten to this point, though, Xiang Shu gave voice to his misgivings.

“They said you killed two thousand people,” Chen Xing said truthfully, “but I know that you were wrongly accused.”

“And how do you know that?”

Chen Xing looked into the campfire. “You wouldn’t do something like that,” he said, a bit absently. “From the day that I first saw you…I knew that you wouldn’t.”

Xiang Shu didn’t pursue this line of questioning any further. In truth, what Chen Xing was remembering was the actual first time that he had met Xiang Shu, when he had been able to sense from his clear gaze that he wasn’t a bad person. But the past Chen Xing hadn’t been quite so certain as he was now; overjoyed to have found his protector, he had thought mainly that Xiang Shu’s eyes were really pretty and that, even if he was a bad guy, it would be fine as long as he was willing to atone for his crimes by doing good deeds. For a long while, Chen Xing hadn’t thought about it any more deeply than that.

“When I was imprisoned,” Xiang Shu said, sounding distant now himself, “I thought about who would come to find and rescue me. I once had such power and prestige that none would dare to think themselves my equal, but in the end, due to a series of unfortunate circumstances, all I could do was wait for my death in a cold, dark cell.”

Chen Xing raised his head to look at Xiang Shu. He hadn’t ever heard Xiang Shu talk about this before; last time, he refused to discuss it at all. But when Chen Xing thought about it from Xiang Shu’s perspective, it made sense.

On the day that Xiang Shu was caught and imprisoned, he must have felt certain that he could escape under his own power. But as he lay there, hungry and in chains, he would have been forced to accept reality; a tiger, on even ground, can be bullied by a dog. As his hope slowly dwindled, he would have come to believe that he might actually die in a cell in a dungeon in Xiangyang. What kind of despair must that have evoked?

Xiang Shu frowned. “My parents are already gone, and since you’ve talked to Zhu Xu about my background, you must know that I’m a Tiele man. I believed for a time that my clansmen would come to save me, that my anda would come…”

Chen Xing had to cut off this wild train of thought before Xiang Shu could get stuck on it. “They’re only human, after all, and they didn’t know where you’d gone. How could they have found you? Don’t think like that.”

“If they wanted to find me, then they could have followed the traces I left behind when I departed. You were able to find me, weren’t you?”

“Don’t think about this anymore!” Chen Xing chided, his tone a little more stern.

Xiang Shu nodded. “They’re only human; I understand. You’re very open and accepting, so it makes sense that in the end, it was you who came to save me.”

He watched Chen Xing, and a long silence fell between the two of them. Chen Xing was beginning to understand that to Xiang Shu, the time Chen Xing saved him was very, very important.

In the past, Chen Xing had struggled to believe that Xiang Shu liked him too, because…what was there to like about him? He had nothing to offer. But now he realized that Xiang Shu had always cared for him a great deal. And from the moment they first met, they’d been destined to develop those complicated feelings for each other.

“Now that I think of it, that was strange.” Xiang Shu turned his head, avoiding Chen Xing’s gaze. “Even at the end, I didn’t give up hope. I felt certain that someone would come to save me… I can’t explain it clearly, but it felt like I was dreaming, repeatedly dreaming of the moment when that person would arrive. Just like you, that person had a ray of light shining on him… I even said to myself that I needed to hold out, hold out until…”

He lowered his voice, as if speaking to himself. “When you arrived in the dungeon and I saw you, it was as if I was…as if…”

Chen Xing’s heart beat violently. Xiang Shu turned his head back to give him another look, and they locked eyes for a moment before Xiang Shu averted his gaze again stiffly.

After a long silence, Chen Xing gave in and asked the question. “As if what?”

“It’s nothing.” Xiang Shu rose, preparing to go back and get some sleep.

“Xiang Shu,” Chen Xing said gently before he could leave. Xiang Shu stopped in his tracks but didn’t turn. “There is one thing that I want to ask of you… No, something I’d like to hear your opinion on. It’s like this: I…I need someone to protect me for a while. It’s a little complicated to explain. I’m the Great Exorcist, and throughout history, every exorcist has needed a…well, a Protector Martial God.”

Xiang Shu hesitated.

“Honestly, you wouldn’t need to do much at all—just stay by my side for now. See, I really have no way to take care of myself.”

Xiang Shu turned his head and looked at Chen Xing, his brow furrowed. He pointed at the house in the distance: *What about Feng Qianjun?*

“No, no!” Chen Xing said immediately. “It’s not like that. He’s going to leave soon. He has lots of his own matters to attend to, and we just happened to meet, so he helped me out. You’ve noticed that he hasn’t paid much attention to me on this journey, right? We’re actually just ordinary friends… No, what am I saying? Don’t misunderstand me. I just wanted to ask you if you…would be willing to…”

Having observed Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun, Xiang Shu found their relationship perplexing. They clearly weren’t distant acquaintances, because when they reunited, they hugged each other and cried. But they also didn’t seem to be close, given that Feng Qianjun hadn’t really looked after Chen Xing at all on their journey so far. In fact, Feng Qianjun’s lack of care almost felt pointed, like he was deliberately throwing Chen Xing at Xiang Shu so as not to have to bear responsibility for him.

“You trust people too easily,” Xiang Shu said, cutting Chen Xing off.

“Oh.” That was a fair assessment. Ever since he was small, Chen Xing had always trusted others easily. It wasn’t a good habit, though he didn’t think it was entirely his own fault, since he’d developed the habit because of Sui Xing.

What would happen if he just went around trusting people willy-nilly? He’d fall prey to liars and frauds, of course. But with Sui Xing around, no one could harm him—or at least, Chen Xing had never worried before that he would meet bad people and fall for their tricks and cons.

“You’re not like that,” Chen Xing said earnestly. “Of course, this isn’t something I want to force upon you. I know you must have your own concerns and responsibilities. But if it’s something you might be willing to do, please consider it.”

“Understood,” Xiang Shu said easily, then went back into the house.

Chen Xing stood there staring dumbly after him. What did that mean? In the past, when he interacted with Xiang Shu, had “understood” meant “okay”? He was pretty sure it had. That was what it meant, right? Yes! Xiang Shu probably wasn’t going to run off again! Chen Xing had won! He’d successfully swindled him! But he still couldn’t let his guard down—he had to stay strong and hold the line!

Amazing! Chen Xing jumped up and pumped his fist in the air, then hopped in a few excited circles, restraining the urge to shout in excitement. On his final turn, he saw Xiang Shu standing not too far away with an odd expression on his face.

Chen Xing stopped and stared at him.

“Give me back my clothes,” said Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing shook his head. “Let me wear them for a little longer. I’m still cold. I want to move around a bit more before I go back to sleep, to keep myself warm.”

Once Xiang Shu had disappeared into the house, Chen Xing ran back into his room, hugging Xiang Shu’s robe close around him and laughing wildly inside his heart. *Success!*

Chapter 94

SOMEONE TOOK A COLD outdoor bath in the second month and shockingly, the next day, he caught a cold.

Chen Xing was drowsy throughout the remainder of their journey to Chang'an, and Xiang Shu had to carry him on horseback the entire way. The three of them slowed their pace, and Chen Xing alternated between wakefulness and sleep, lying against Xiang Shu's back. It was several days before he fully recovered, and even then he looked exhausted and drained.

Before they entered the city, Sima Wei, the drought fiend king, went to hide in the outskirts near Epang Palace. Chen Xing told him he could go where he pleased as long as he steered clear of the common people. If needed, someone would send him a message.

As they entered Chang'an, Chen Xing sneezed and wiped his nose forcefully. They had returned. He, Feng Qianjun, and Xiang Shu sat down in front of a market stall, each with a large bowl of noodles.

"Well, I'll be off," said Feng Qianjun. "I'll head to the Songbai Residence, settle in, and gather more information. After we finish eating, should we…split up?"

Chen Xing nodded weakly, still a bit out of it thanks to his waning cold. He and Feng Qianjun had privately decided that after they entered the city, Feng Qianjun would first go confirm whether his older brother, Feng Qianyi, was alive, then try to retrieve the Yin Yang Mirror. Chen Xing didn't want to follow him and risk making Feng Qianyi suspicious, which would make it harder to control the situation. Everything had to wait until they had the Yin Yang Mirror in hand.

Seeing that Xiang Shu looked as unflappable as always, Feng Qianjun decided that there was no need to worry about the Great Chanyu and casually poured water in place of tea. "All right everyone, once we finish, let's go our separate ways. Send me a message once you've found a place to settle in. I'm guessing Xiang—um, the doggy will go with you guys?"

“You go ahead,” Chen Xing replied casually. It was safer for the dog to stay with them. Xiang Shu remained silent, contemplating his tea.

“It’s getting late,” Feng Qianjun reminded Chen Xing, pointing up at the sky.

Chen Xing knew what Feng Qianjun was telling him. The last time they came to Chang’an, he’d been in good health, but the slight illness he’d caught this time had slowed them considerably. Finding a place for Sima Wei to hide had delayed them further, so it was nearly dusk by the time they entered the city—half a day later than last time.

The Chang’an market was bustling, but it was near time for it to close. Clothing stores and bathhouses were shutting for the evening. Chen Xing stood on the street, scratched his head, and then looked at Xiang Shu, who was silently following him. No matter where Chen Xing went, he followed without saying a word.

“Where should we stay?” Chen Xing asked. “We need to find a place.”

“Do you know anyone in Chang’an?” Xiang Shu asked.

Chen Xing thought of Yuwen Xin, but he had no desire to look for him. He sighed. “When I was young, I had a close friend who lived in Chang’an, but I don’t want to see him.”

From the sorrow in Chen Xing’s voice, Xiang Shu guessed the rough shape of what had happened. “People change,” he said lightly. “It’s only natural.”

Chen Xing found himself wondering suddenly why Xiang Shu had been so slow to reveal his identity as the Great Chanyu before. Had he suspected that becoming emperor had changed Fu Jian? If so, then perhaps Xiang Shu hadn’t wanted to stay in the palace at all, but he’d ended up forced to seek out Fu Jian because he had nowhere else to go. From there, all kinds of trouble had followed…

“How much money do we have left?” Chen Xing asked. “Is it enough for an inn?”

Without a word, Xiang Shu held up two fingers, between which he held their last gold ingot. Chen Xing hadn’t managed to earn anything from

his medical work in Mai City, and he'd lived off Feng Qianjun and Xiang Shu on the road. Unlike last time, he couldn't even afford a bath, much less a change of clothes.

The noise of the market was gradually dying down. Xiang Shu seemed to be considering their options. "I… There's something I want to check," said Chen Xing.

They made their way to Baihu Street, which ran from east to west. Chen Xing paused at the side of the road and stood there silently for a moment, a faint trace of hope flickering in his heart. He waited, and before long, a procession approached from the east, just as he expected. Four mounted imperial guards led the way, and they were followed by a jade-inlaid carriage.

Chen Xing wanted to confirm with his own eyes that Tuoba Yan was alive, and sure enough, he was.

He and Feng Qianjun had talked about this possibility along the way, but the moment Chen Xing saw Tuoba Yan in person, he was overwhelmed with a mix of emotions. He wanted to call out to him, but then he remembered the consequences of that brief encounter with Tuoba Yan at Yuwen Xin's residence: Tuoba Yan's family had been destroyed, and Tuoba Yan himself died by Fu Jian's imperial sword. Chen Xing really didn't want to drag him into trouble again.

Still…he wanted to confirm for himself that the person inside the carriage truly was Tuoba Yan. Then he could truly feel at ease. At the same time, though, he didn't want Tuoba Yan to notice him. Just recalling how Tuoba Yan had chased him all the way to Chi Le Chuan to confess his feelings was enough to make Chen Xing want to disappear.

Conflicted and uneasy, Chen Xing felt his heart twist itself into knots. Xiang Shu glanced at him and frowned hard, seeming to sense something of Chen Xing's inner turmoil. When the carriage drew close to them, Chen Xing couldn't resist leaning forward for a better look.

"Move aside!" yelled one of the guards leading the procession. "Move!"

Xiang Shu watched Chen Xing silently. The guard raised his whip to drive Chen Xing back, but Chen Xing quickly stepped aside, laughing

awkwardly. “Okay, I’ve seen enough. Let’s go.”

Xiang Shu seemed ready to leave it at that…but then apparently changed his mind. Without turning his head, he flicked his wrist; there was a sharp whistling sound as a gold ingot flashed through the air and struck the guard square in the eye. The guard shrieked and toppled off his horse, his eye already swelling black and blue.

Chen Xing jumped in fright and hurriedly grabbed Xiang Shu’s hand. “What are you doing?! Come on, let’s go!”

But that blow was no small matter. The guards surged forward, bows raised and arrows nocked, to surround them on all sides. Xiang Shu stood in front of Chen Xing, unmoving and steady as a mountain, aiming a cold, indifferent gaze at the guards around them.

Chen Xing tugged at Xiang Shu’s sleeve. “Don’t fight! Let’s just leave, okay?” Xiang Shu glanced at him, and he added, “Spare them, will you? There’s no need to bully them. These guards have parents who love them too, you know.”

There was silence as everyone stared at him in disbelief.

Xiang Shu was outnumbered twenty to one. Chen Xing’s words were a slap in the imperial guards’ faces—shocking no-one, they flew into a rage. But Xiang Shu, surprisingly, seemed rather pleased. He slid an arm around Chen Xing’s waist, set one hand against his back, and got ready to scoop him up, sweep through the crowd, and vault over the wall to make their escape.

But then an impatient voice came from inside the carriage. “What’s going on now?”

The curtain lifted, and a boot-clad foot stepped onto the carriage shaft—though its owner didn’t fully alight. The hand holding the curtain was adorned with a simple, rustic ring. Dressed in an ochre martial robe, his features sharp and striking beneath the dusk sky, Tuoba Yan’s figure came partially into view.

Chen Xing’s eyes widened, and for a moment, his gaze locked with Tuoba Yan’s. Tuoba Yan frowned slightly, looking them over with obvious bemusement as his guards hurried back to the carriage to report.

“Tuoba Yan,” Chen Xing said with a smile.

Tuoba Yan only looked more puzzled. “Do I know you?”

Chen Xing quickly waved his hand. “Nope, not at all.” He was covered in dust and still in the same clothes he had worn in Mai City, having traveled for days without so much as a wash. His face was filthy, too. Beside him, Xiang Shu, wearing a hunter’s robe with a bow slung over his shoulder and a sword at his waist, was just as grimy. They looked for all the word like a pair of brothers who’d come to the capital to try their luck.

Tuoba Yan studied them for a moment, but quickly lost interest in Chen Xing. After listening to his guards’ account, he nodded and let the curtain fall.

“My lord says he’ll let it go!” one of the guards barked gruffly. “We won’t lower ourselves to your level! Now scram!”

Chen Xing blinked. Just like that, the carriage rolled on past them and left. *Well, this could be…a kind of fate.*

Xiang Shu stood at Chen Xing’s side, quietly watching him. Chen Xing hadn’t particularly wanted to interact with Tuoba Yan, and that unexpected encounter had been surprising. He stood and reflected for a little longer, then said, “I’m relieved to see that he’s doing well. I’m happy for him, truly happy…” He smiled at Xiang Shu. “Where did you throw the gold? I’ll go look for it.”

But Xiang Shu turned and walked away.

Chen Xing quickly chased after him. “Wait! Where are you going?”

“Looking for Jiantou,” Xiang Shu said, stopping outside the back gate of Weiyang Palace to speak to the guard.

“You again?” the guard said, then paused and muttered, “Wait, why did I say ‘again’?”

The uproar was almost immediate. Guards poured in to take action. Chen Xing caught up with Xiang Shu at the back gate and reached out to grab his sleeve, but Xiang Shu was ahead of him; he swiftly knocked down two guards with his sword and sheath, then grabbed Chen Xing’s wrist and pulled him into the palace.

After about an incense stick's time, Weiyang Palace was in the grip of chaos. Xiang Shu dragged Chen Xing along after him, and Chen Xing, holding the dog with one hand, was powerless to do anything but follow. *How is this happening again?!* he thought, stunned.

But this time, the route seemed different, and there were fewer guards in Xiang Shu's way. Finally, they arrived at Dengming Hall, Xiang Shu holding a longsword in one hand and tugging Chen Xing along with the other.

"Wait!" shouted Chen Xing. "This isn't what we agreed on!"

Xiang Shu raised his foot and kicked open the towering doors to Dengming Hall. A group of guards swarmed in and surrounded Fu Jian protectively.

Fu Jian, who had been discussing matters with civil and military officials behind closed doors, was stunned to see Xiang Shu. "Shulü Kong?!"

Chen Xing put a hand to his forehead. Xiang Shu narrowed his eyes, sensing that something was indefinably off, and Fu Jian was taken by a strange flash of déjà vu.

All the civil and military officials cried out in alarm. "Great Chanyu?!"

Well, Chen Xing thought, *if this is how things are going to be, I might as well play along*. He turned to Xiang Shu, making sure to adopt a tone of awe. "Xiang Shu, what did they call you? Great what?"

A short while later, Princess Qinghe and a few of her attendants arrived with food for everyone. She personally poured wine for Xiang Shu, and Fu Jian laughed heartily as he reminisced with him. Chen Xing, bored out of his mind listening to the same conversation for a second time, fed the dog a lamb bone. The dog held the bone in its paws and chewed away. When it saw Princess Qinghe, though, it seemed to recognize her and suddenly started barking wildly.

"Oh?" Princess Qinghe laughed. "So ferocious. What's its name?"

Chen Xing hesitated. "Uh…"

“It’s called Chen Xing,” Xiang Shu answered politely. Chen Xing shot him a glare, then took a deep breath and thought, *Forget it*.

“And who is this young man?” Fu Jian asked. “We haven’t had the pleasure of being introduced yet.”

“I’m also called Chen Xing,” Chen Xing replied.

Xiang Shu spat out his drink in surprise. He hadn’t expected Chen Xing to be so straightforward.

Fu Jian laughed again. “Shulü Kong, where on earth have you been for the past year? We’ve sent people everywhere searching for you.”

I’ve never seen you go looking for him, Chen Xing thought. *You’re just using empty words to try to make yourself look good*. *Xiang Shu was right. You’re an emperor—if you truly wanted to find someone, wouldn’t it be easy?*

Another thought occurred to him then. Fu Jian’s apparent concern—was it possible that he actually welcomed Xiang Shu’s disappearance? After all, if Chi Le Chuan’s Great Chanyu disappeared, someone else would have to be elected. Someone Fu Jian might be able to manipulate into conferring him the purple scroll he so desired.

Had Xiang Shu known all along what Chen Xing was only realizing now? Had he just never mentioned it? Had he simply chosen not to say anything about it?

“A year ago, I…” Xiang Shu began, but Chen Xing reached out and lightly tapped his thigh with his fingers, and he hesitated. “…I felt very stifled in the north,” Xiang Shu continued smoothly. “I wanted to go to Jiangnan, but I found myself unexpectedly lured into a trap by the Han people in the Central Plains. I ended up falling into enemy hands.”

“Oh…” Fu Jian appeared to be deep in thought. “Did you go to the south to find your fated one? Or were you going to your maternal uncle’s house?”

Xiang Shu frowned, as if annoyed that Fu Jian had mentioned something he shouldn’t have—presumably the part about looking for his maternal uncle. Fu Jian knew that Xiang Shu had a Han mother.

Fu Jian shot a curious glance at Chen Xing. “How did you two meet? Where are you from, young friend?”

Chen Xing thought that revealing the full extent of his background would frighten both of them to death. He smiled. “My father was Chen Zhe. We used to live in Jinyang. My parents passed away during the Battle of Jinyang.”

Fu Jian looked shocked. “You’re descended from Chen Zhe?” he murmured, furrowing his brow. Xiang Shu looked between them, a question in his eyes. “Are any of your loved ones still alive?”

“Yes.” Chen Xing glanced at Xiang Shu and smiled.

Xiang Shu turned to Chen Xing, still looking puzzled. “Who was your father?”

Chen Xing kept smiling. “Just an ordinary scholar.”

“Half of Our civil and military officials were students of Chen Zhe,” Fu Jian told Xiang Shu, “and the other half are in Jiankang.”

Xiang Shu had no response to that. Chen Xing thought for a moment, but decided not to mention that Wang Meng was his shixiong; he didn’t want Wang Ziye to know anything about his lineage.

“Where have you been all these years?” asked Fu Jian. “When Jinyang fell, Chen-xiansheng’s family died with the city—it’s one of the greatest regrets of Our life.”

“Oh, really?” Chen Xing didn’t know much about those events. “My father’s friend got me out safe when the city fell. Later, I was told that my family died in the chaos.”

Fu Jian sighed. “Such a pity. Truly, such a pity.”

“It’s not a pity,” Chen Xing said, smiling. “A scholar who dies for his country has achieved the noble end he sought. What’s pitiable about that?”

Back when Ran Min, the great Han military leader, had established the Great Wei in the north, Chen Zhe educated students for him, all of whom went on to become distinguished officials. To survive, Chen Zhe could have simply worked for Fu Jian; doing so would have ensured the safety of his family and secured him high positions and generous rewards.

Instead, after the fall of Ran Min, Chen Zhe had entrusted his beloved son to Baili Lun and chose to die for the country, frustrating Fu Jian to no end.

Xiang Shu looked at Chen Xing, a very complicated expression on his face. Fu Jian nodded.

The question that had troubled Chen Xing for the past three years finally slipped from his lips. “I heard that my father’s student, Yuwen Xin, is also an official in the court?”

Fu Jian thought for a moment before replying. “Yuwen Xin… Yes. We sent him to persuade your father to return. We had hoped that, with their bond as master and disciple, Yuwen Xin would be able to convince Chen Zhe to let go of his stubbornness. We should have sent Jinglüe instead.”

Catching something from this brief exchange, Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing, who smiled wistfully as he pieced together a rough picture of the events. It wasn’t entirely accurate, then, to say that Yuwen Xin had killed his parents—perhaps Feng Qianyi had exaggerated to provoke him—but there was some truth to it. In the end, it was likely a mix of truth and lies.

A moment of silence settled over the three of them. Then Fu Jian said, “Young Chen-xiansheng, you must come and serve as an official in Our court.”

Chen Xing burst into laughter. He found Fu Jian very amusing. Xiang Shu hesitated, wanting to say something, but ultimately chose to remain silent and just took a sip of wine. Fu Jian, meanwhile, looked taken aback by Chen Xing’s reaction.

Xiang Shu, seeing that there were things Chen Xing couldn’t say, finally stepped in. “Jiantou,” he said in a cold voice, “his father chose to die rather than surrender and used his death to repay his country. How could he possibly come and serve under you?”

Anger flashed in Fu Jian’s eyes, but Chen Xing smiled and explained, “The Great Chanyu’s exaggerating. After my family was destroyed, my shifu always admonished me to avoid government and stick to being a doctor. I’ve never read any sage texts, so I would only bring you trouble. Forgive me, for I have the intention but not the ability.”

“Even a nominal position would do,” Fu Jian pressed, smiling back. Chen Zhe’s death had caused a huge uproar, and many scholars felt guilty about him dying a “martyr’s death.” Chen Zhe’s son joining Fu Jian’s court would likely alleviate that grievance to some extent.

Now Xiang Shu was truly angry. “Do you not understand human speech?!”

Chen Xing hastily pulled on Xiang Shu’s hand, trying to get him to calm down. To Fu Jian, he said, “My father had his principles, and I’m sure the officials in the court also have their own ambitions. Some are devoted to their homeland, while others wish to serve under Your Majesty and strive for prosperity and peace in the Divine Land. It’s just a difference in choice. Why should Your Majesty hold onto the events of the past?”

Fu Jian’s expression softened slightly. He realized that, as a ruler, he had acted a bit rashly. After Chen Xing politely declined, he should not have continued to press the issue. It was unbecoming of a monarch; that was why Xiang Shu had reprimanded him. “We raise a cup in respect to Young Chen-xiansheng,” he said.

“You never told me,” Xiang Shu said, frowning.

“And you never told me you were the Great Chanyu.” Chen Xing grinned. “So we’re even. I’ll raise a cup to the Great Chanyu.”

Xiang Shu ignored him. He was silent for a moment, thinking, then glanced at Chen Xing. “We haven’t decided yet.”

Hearing that “we,” Fu Jian said nothing more, simply nodded.

Xiang Shu finished his drink and stood. “You go ahead with your affairs, Jiantou. We’ll take our leave.”

It was the third month, and a gentle spring-night breeze swept through Weiyang Palace. Slightly tipsy from the wine, Chen Xing followed Xiang Shu to the imperial baths. The hot water turned his shoulders red, and he eyed Xiang Shu beside him.

A palace attendant knelt at the pool’s edge. “Great Chanyu.”

“No need to mind us,” said Chen Xing.

“Leave,” Xiang Shu ordered uncaringly. The attendants retreated.

“The Four Seas and the prairies are the Great Chanyu’s land, and all people under the sky are the Great Chanyu’s people,” Chen Xing murmured to himself. “The master of the land beyond the pass, the mightiest warrior—Shulü Kong.”

Xiang Shu hesitated as if he wanted to say something, but in the end he didn’t.

“Being the Great Chanyu sounds prestigious, but it must be exhausting.” Chen Xing sighed, thinking about the past Xiang Shu. “So many tribes to care for, and no real choice in the matter.”

Xiang Shu looked momentarily startled. He studied Chen Xing, which made Chen Xing feel a little self-conscious, but then a faint flush appeared on Xiang Shu’s face instead and he awkwardly turned away. After a brief silence, he glanced back at Chen Xing, who motioned for him to turn around, then took a cloth and began scrubbing Xiang Shu’s shoulders.

“You always know what I’m thinking,” Xiang Shu said. “I can wash myself. You’re the son of a great scholar and an exorcist, not a servant. Half the Han officials in this court were your father’s students. I wouldn’t dream of having you serve me.”

“What does it matter?” Chen Xing laughed. “When we first met, I didn’t know who you were, and you didn’t know who I was. What difference does it make?”

He thought back to all the times when he’d fallen unconscious. Xiang Shu must have fed him, cleaned him, turned him over, and washed his face, day after day. A wave of warmth filled Chen Xing’s heart.

After a moment of silence, Xiang Shu asked, “Have you gone back to see your home?”

“No. After my shifu passed away, I left the mountain to find you… and to investigate what had happened.” Xiang Shu seemed puzzled by that answer but didn’t press further. Chen Xing smiled. “It’s all right. We still have plenty of time.”

The days ahead are long, and we could spend them together. But as for how you feel…I’m not sure. Then, all at once, Chen Xing let go of that

thought. It no longer seemed so important whether Xiang Shu would ever like him the same way again. What did it matter if Xiang Shu ever returned his feelings, as long as Xiang Shu was happy?

That night, Fu Jian arranged for them to stay in a different sleeping chamber than the last time they were in the palace.

Inside, there was only one large bed.

Chen Xing stopped short, staring at it. Xiang Shu loosened his robe, saying nothing; he sat at the edge of the bed, where he glanced at Chen Xing, then at the bed, and raised an eyebrow. Chen Xing immediately understood what he was asking: *Should we request to switch rooms? Can you sleep like this?*

Chen Xing responded with a small nod. Their unspoken understanding was seamless—they didn't even need words to communicate. Even Xiang Shu seemed to find it a bit surprising.

"I'll sleep on the inside," Chen Xing said, climbing onto the bed and moving to the side against the wall. "Ah, this palace is so nice and comfortable, way better than sleeping on the road."

This was the most comfortable bed Chen Xing had ever slept in. Xiang Shu lay down with him, still saying nothing.

There was only one brocade quilt to cover them both. Xiang Shu pulled the quilt a little more toward himself, and Chen Xing immediately asked, "What are you doing?"

Xiang Shu furrowed his brow. "It's not covering me."

Chen Xing had no choice but to shift a little closer to him. Even then, the quilt was only so big, so they ended up both moving closer to the center of the bed. Chen Xing's heart pounded. This wasn't the first time they had slept together; back on the boat, they had even embraced each other as they slept, skin to skin. But they'd both been utterly exhausted then.

Neither of them spoke. Chen Xing lay with his back to Xiang Shu, eyes closed, unable to sleep. He heard Xiang Shu's breathing even out behind him and then suddenly grow heavy. A moment later, Xiang Shu jolted awake.

Chen Xing turned to glance at him, concerned by his ragged breaths. “Is it too hot?”

“No.” Xiang Shu turned his head to look at Chen Xing too. There was something odd about his gaze. “I don’t know why, but while I was half asleep, I had a dream. But it didn’t feel like a dream…”

“Oh? What did you dream about?”

Xiang Shu’s face suddenly flushed red. He waved his hand dismissively and turned away. “Go to sleep.”

Chen Xing stared at his turned back, baffled.

More time passed. At last, Xiang Shu couldn’t take it anymore. He sat up, still breathing roughly, glanced at Chen Xing, then abruptly got out of bed.

“Huh?” Chen Xing said groggily. Half asleep, he sat up too. “What’s wrong?”

“Can’t sleep. I’m going to sit for a bit.”

Too sleepy to care, Chen Xing collapsed back onto the bed. Xiang Shu, clad only in black undershorts, lowered his head and spotted a pair of thin leather shoes on the floor. Suddenly, that strange, lingering feeling returned. Why did so many things feel like they had happened before? Yet he couldn’t remember where or when, and he couldn’t recall any details no matter how hard he tried.

Stepping outside, Xiang Shu let the moonlight wash over him. He sat outside the sleeping chamber with his thoughts in utter disarray. Some memories felt so close, just within reach—Chen Xing’s bare skin, the warmth he felt when he pulled Chen Xing into his embrace on the ship, the way the rocking waves had pushed them toward each other in that fleeting moment. Every sensation was vivid, imprinted deep in his mind. But when did any of that actually happen?!

Chapter 95

SIX HOURS EARLIER, at nightfall, in the Songbai Residence, Feng Qianjun saw his older brother. His hands began to tremble uncontrollably.

“Dage,” he said, trying his best to control his shaking voice. “I…I’m here.”

“Oh? How was your trip?”

Feng Qianyi didn’t look any different than before. He was sitting in his wooden wheelchair, his manner easy and casual as he sipped on his tea. He had returned from a trip to Jiankang just before the year started, and it had only been about half a year since he parted from his little brother.

The little brother in question was staring at him, looking dazed. Feng Qianyi was perplexed. “What’s the matter?” he asked, brow knitted.

Feng Qianjun shook his head and took a deep breath. “During the past six months, the matter of restoring the country…”

He trailed off. Feng Qianyi just looked at him, somewhat confused. Feng Qianjun had planned to say a lot of things, but the moment he came face-to-face with his older brother, nothing actually came out. Because their parents had passed away early on, when Feng Qianjun was nine and Feng Qianyi was around ten, the two brothers were truly close. Feng Qianjun had never been able to hide anything from Feng Qianyi, ever since they were children. But while Feng Qianyi could tell that his little brother was acting strange, he couldn’t pinpoint what, exactly, was off about him.

Finally, Feng Qianjun smiled, though his smile contained a hint of sadness. “Restoring the country… Is it still going well?”

Feng Qianyi took another sip of his tea and then put a cup in front of Feng Qianjun, who accepted it. “That’s not something you should be concerned about,” he replied eventually. “What took you so long?”

After a moment’s thought, Feng Qianjun said, “The chaos of war in Xiangyang made the road difficult to travel.”

This was not entirely convincing. “Did you bring the Saber of Harmony and Life?”

Feng Qianjun untied the scabbard and put it on the table. Feng Qianyi drew the saber out and took a look at it, then returned it to the scabbard.

“You’re here,” he said, “so you might as well stay. This saber is a precious heirloom, so I’ll keep it safe in your stead.”

Feng Qianjun was flabbergasted. He wanted to say something, but he couldn’t come up with an excuse. His brother wanted to hold onto the saber; what was there to be done? If he said a single word in protest, it would just raise Feng Qianyi’s guard. Anyway, when he thought about it, he figured it should be okay; the key to controlling this divine weapon was long lost, and back then, it had been a complete surprise when Chen Xing found the ancient records in the ruins of the Exorcism Department inside the Yin Yang Mirror. Even if Feng Qianyi held onto the saber, he wouldn’t be able to use it.

“All right,” Feng Qianjun said. He had no other choice.

“In a few days, I’ll bring you to meet a friend,” Feng Qianyi said breezily. “Go and get some rest; you must be tired from your journey. Servants, come and take the second master to rest.”

Feng Qianjun had to do as he said. He walked out of the room, and just before he left to take a bath and change his clothes, he looked back at the closed door behind him. Through the gap in the door, he saw Feng Qianyi draw the saber again and lower his head, gazing at the blade in silence.

The next morning, in Weiyang Palace, Chen Xing was woken by noise outside the door and found his entire body wrapped around Xiang Shu’s. Xiang Shu was motionless, the sound of his breathing controlled, and his whole body was stiff.

Chen Xing grimaced, careful not to make any kind of movement; this position was way too suggestive! In his sleep, he had unknowingly invaded Xiang Shu’s side of the bed, and now he was using Xiang Shu’s arm as a pillow with his own arm wrapped around Xiang Shu’s neck. His face was buried between Xiang Shu’s bare shoulder and neck, and one of his legs

was flung over him. Xiang Shu, meanwhile, was lying with both arms spread out.

Pretending to still be asleep, Chen Xing slowly rolled over and separated himself from Xiang Shu little by little. On the other side, Xiang Shu let out a sigh of relief; in the blink of an eye, he got up and climbed off the bed.

A eunuch came over with new clothes for them. After the Great Chanyu's sudden return the previous evening, the tailors had worked through the night to make these clothes as fast as possible based on the measurements of Xiang Shu's old clothes. There were pieces of jewelry too, and inside a case, the Sixteen Hu's signet ring engraved with the ruler's seal.

Hearing him moving around inside, people outside the door entered the room and swarmed Xiang Shu like bees. They smoothed out his sideburns and did his hair in dozens of tiny niumang braids, which were then pulled up to the back of his head according to Hu custom. They adorned the ponytail with a white jade band and then arranged three plumes in his hair in place of the Great Chanyu's feathered crown.

Chen Xing got up. He was given Hu clothing despite the fact that he'd been dressed in the Han style the night before, but it wasn't like he cared much either way. The back part of the Hu clothing was fitted against the skin, which made his waist look very straight—nothing like the wide robes and oversized sleeves of the Han. It lent him a special kind of handsome, carefree air.

To top it all off, Fu Jian had sent their dog a small sheepskin jacket with an extra silver collar.

"Fu Jian went so far as to get you a set of rings?" Chen Xing asked curiously.

Xiang Shu was standing in front of a mirror, being served by eunuchs, and he raised his eyebrows questioningly as his clothes were arranged. Chen Xing realized suddenly that Fu Jian had to have obtained this set of rings, which symbolized the Great Chanyu's authority, from the Han. Someone must have confiscated the rings when Xiang Shu was

arrested—and the fact that they were in Fu Jian's possession meant that Fu Jian had known about Xiang Shu's arrest.

A eunuch put the three rings on the fingers of Xiang Shu's left hand. Each was inlaid with precious gems. When Xiang Shu saw Chen Xing scrutinizing the rings, he took one off and passed it to him. Chen Xing nearly declined but, on second thought, he accepted it.

"These rings, what are their significance?" Chen Xing asked, lowering his head. Xiang Shu's hand was big; the ring, which was supposed to go on Xiang Shu's pinky, fit Chen Xing's ring finger. It was a turquoise ring engraved with trees and many kinds of animals.

"To start and end war; to control trade, commerce, and territorial division; and to bestow life or give death to people," Xiang Shu replied, nonchalant. "They symbolize the powers of the Great Chanyu. The one on your hand means power over life or death."

The eunuchs were shocked to see Xiang Shu give one of the Great Chanyu's rings to Chen Xing. They wanted to say something but didn't know exactly what, so they stuck to giving each other meaningful glances. Xiang Shu, meanwhile, had already turned around and left the screen. He sat down on a couch, and several people hurried over with a small table and served him milk tea.

When Chen Xing looked at the couch outside the screen, he saw that, unlike last time, there was a small seat arranged for him. He threw a look at Xiang Shu.

Xiang Shu had no idea what the look was for. "Sit down. What do you want for breakfast?"

Slightly overwhelmed by the gesture, Chen Xing went over to the couch and sat down with Xiang Shu to drink some milk tea and start on his breakfast.

There must have been a long line of people waiting outside the room, because as soon as a eunuch opened the door, all kinds of Hu people poured in. Speaking Tiele, Xiongnu, Xianbei, Rouran, and many other languages, they said, "The Four Seas and the prairies are the Great Chanyu's land, and all people under the sky are the Great Chanyu's people," and started kowtowing.

Chen Xing was scared shitless to have this directed at him as well as at Xiang Shu. *I'd prefer it if you guys didn't kowtow to me, okay? Worship Xiang Shu all you want—that's fine—but bowing to me too is so embarrassing!*

He looked at Xiang Shu again. Like the first time, Xiang Shu was wearing a navy brocade robe embroidered with the totems of the Sixteen Hu of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant, and the gold embroidery shone bright under the sunlight. His hair was all done in tiny, jet-black braids; a dark-golden belt with a soaring dragon design was wrapped around his waist, and black-lacquered deerskin boots adorned his feet. He crossed his legs, and with the cold, stern look on his face, his bright eyes seemed to shine like stars in the dark. Sunlight glinted off the two precious gemstone rings on his fingers.

"Yeluosa," Xiang Shu said, without even properly looking at the people packed in the hall, and took another sip of his milk tea.

Chen Xing soaked a deep-fried sangza in a silver bowl of cow's milk and used a spoon inlaid with a precious gem to eat it. He looked out at all the people and found them peeking right back at him, stealing glances at the ring on his finger.

"'Yeluosa' means 'be at ease' in the Tiele language," Xiang Shu said indifferently, ignoring them all as he finished his breakfast. When he was done, he raised his eyebrows at the gathered people, prompting them to say what they wanted to say.

The Hu people began by asking Xiang Shu when he had arrived, but they didn't even wait for his response before they launched into a series of denunciations of Fu Jian.

Chen Xing felt like he was sitting on pins and needles. He snuck a glance at Xiang Shu, still thinking of what had happened when he woke up early that morning. That body under Xiang Shu's royal Great Chanyu robe was incomparably warm, and its scent had made Chen Xing feel comfortable and at ease. From the very start, he had always found Xiang Shu strikingly good-looking; now that they were closer, he couldn't keep his eyes off of him.

Xiang Shu shot a sidelong glance of his own back at Chen Xing, though he made no comment. These stuffy old Hu veterans had agitated

him somewhat, and he nodded to show them that he was aware of the situation.

“Since Wang Meng’s death,” a Hu man said in Xiongnu, “Fu Jian’s actions have become more and more extravagant. In spite of all of the people trying to dissuade him, he’s insisted on recruiting more troops so that he can launch an expedition against the Jin. That one Han, Wang Ziye, is also adding fuel to the fire. All those Han people in the court are running amok…” The man glanced at Chen Xing.

“He’s no match for the south,” Chen Xing interjected in Xiongnu.

Xiang Shu looked at Chen Xing, visibly stunned. The other people in the room were even more shocked. This Han boy could understand what they were saying?!

From the glance the man had shot him—and what he was saying about Han people—Chen Xing had suspected that the conversation would soon turn to why he, Chen Xing, was there. To avoid any awkwardness over them saying things they shouldn’t say, he’d decided to make it clear to them all that he could understand them.

“The south’s Beifu Army isn’t great in number,” Chen Xing added, “but the Han use the Yangtze River as a natural stronghold; Fu Jian won’t be able to just waltz right through. Think about it: When he still lived, why did Wang Meng warn Fu Jian again and again to never attack the Jin? He must have had his reasons.”

Xiang Shu’s expression was one of absolute bafflement. The Xiongnu that Chen Xing spoke wasn’t the one commonly heard in Chi Le Chuan; it was the dialect of the ancient Xiongnu people.

“A person bent on going their own way will be dissuaded by no one,” Xiang Shu said in the Tiele language. This was a famous Tiele proverb. Chen Xing had heard it in Chi Le Chuan, and he still remembered it now.

After that, Xiang Shu fell silent again. Everyone quieted down and changed tack. If Xiang Shu was unwilling to overthrow Fu Jian, they asked, could he at least lead the remaining Hu in Chang’an back to Chi Le Chuan?

“The road to Chi Le Chuan isn’t blocked,” said Xiang Shu. “Anyone who wishes to leave can leave. It’s up to you.” With that, he stood up from the couch and actually walked out, leaving the crowd there behind them. On

his way out, he turned his head back toward Chen Xing and whistled at the dog.

Chen Xing got with the program. He caught up to him with the dog in tow. “Where to?”

Xiang Shu didn’t answer. Just like that, they left all those Hu people behind.

Smiling, Chen Xing used the Tiele language to complete the second half of Xiang Shu’s proverb. “A person bent on going their own way will be dissuaded by no one, just as a horse pursued by a fierce wolf cannot be reined in. Fu Jian must have the mindset of that fierce wolf, if he intends to be remembered through the ages as the sovereign who unified the north and the south.”

“I didn’t think any Han would want to learn the Tiele language,” Xiang Shu said seriously. He did not ask where Chen Xing had learned Tiele and Xiongnu.

Chen Xing kept smiling, though he had a bit of a guilty conscience. “There are many kinds of Han people, just like how there are many kinds of Hu people.”

Xiang Shu’s tone became heavy. “You Han shouldn’t be able to forget the blood feud and deep hatred between our people, not even after a thousand years have passed.”

Chen Xing thought for a moment. “You’re not like the rest of them. Did you ask me to follow you out here just to ask about this?”

They approached an imperial guard, and Xiang Shu stopped walking and addressed him. “Go tell your Regular Mounted Attendant to come and drive a carriage for the Great Chanyu. Let Jiantou know.”

Obligingly, Tuoba Yan came to them. As the leader of Fu Jian’s imperial guard squadron, and with the official title of Regular Mounted Attendant, he was of the lower fourth rank. Ordinary officials had to be polite to him and call him “Tuoba-daren.” Xiang Shu, however, was on almost equal footing with Fu Jian. Tuoba Yan couldn’t ignore him. Not even Fu Jian knew what Tuoba Yan had done to offend Xiang Shu, but Fu Jian wanted the Purple Scroll, and that meant Tuoba Yan could help him improve his relationship with Xiang Shu.

Contrary to typical expectations for a Regular Mounted Attendant, though, Tuoba Yan was very open-minded. He saluted Xiang Shu, directed his subordinates to get Fu Jian's carriage ready, and said, "Great Chanyu, if you please."

"I don't…think there's any need for that," Chen Xing said. He thought Xiang Shu might have gotten the incorrect impression that Tuoba Yan was a close childhood friend of his, but he didn't know how to explain the mistake, and Xiang Shu, of course, wasn't about to bring it up.

"Where do you want to go?" Xiang Shu asked him.

The last time they were in Chang'an, Chen Xing had been too busy to do anything at all; he'd wanted to work but faced an assassination attempt instead. Maybe this time around, he could finally have a taste of Chang'an's local customs and traditions. "I want to get off the carriage and go for a walk. How about the market? But I think it'd be better to let Tuoba-daren go back to the palace first."

They got out of the carriage. Xiang Shu waved Tuoba Yan over. "Take this dog for a walk," he said. "Don't let it run away or get lost."

Tuoba Yan and Chen Xing both stared at him.

In the span of a single night, news of the esteemed Great Chanyu's arrival had reached all four corners of Chang'an. Now that the Great Chanyu had left the palace in Fu Jian's imperial carriage, the Hu of Chang'an were tripping all over each other to go see him. Along their route, people lined the road on both sides, saluting him as he passed. At first Xiang Shu tried to say "Yeluosa" to them in reply, but he eventually got tired of saying it and just ignored them.

More and more Hu packed the streets, and they were joined by no few Han who hoped to catch a glimpse of Xiang Shu and his renowned elegance. It turned Chen Xing's mood sour. He kept looking at Xiang Shu and then around at all the people, and for a time, they both walked in silence.

"Just pretend they don't exist," Xiang Shu told him. "Where do you want to go? I haven't been to Chang'an in a long time either."

Chen Xing pulled Xiang Shu toward a place where Han people were gathered. Tuoba Yan didn't need things explained to him. He promptly ordered a group of imperial guards to come over and block the road so that nobody would stare at them; it was obvious the Great Chanyu didn't like to be watched. Bit by bit, the crowd thinned out around Chen Xing and Xiang Shu, and by the time they reached the Han district, most of the onlookers were gone. All that remained were a few young men and women stealing admiring glances at Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing had just intended to stroll around, but then he saw some stalls selling hanging bracelets. They weren't the moon-shell bracelets from the Autumn Deity Festival, just regular ornaments, but he stopped to take a look. Xiang Shu stood behind him with his hands behind his back.

"Haggle first," Xiang Shu said. "I didn't bring any money."

That made Chen Xing laugh hard. He was certain that Xiang Shu had brought money and was just teasing him. "I don't want to buy it," he replied. "They just reminded me of a story."

Xiang Shu gave him a quizzical look, and they resumed walking slowly around the market, side by side.

Chen Xing thought for a long time before he decided to explain. "Our Jiangnan region has a festival called the Autumn Deity Festival. On the day of the festival, there's this tradition where two people who like each other will buy each other bracelets with moon shells on them."

Xiang Shu hummed, and Chen Xing tipped his head to look at him.

"There were these two people who *ought* to have both liked each other. They strolled down the street, saw these bracelets, and bought them…but even though one of them waited for a long time, the other person didn't give the bracelet to them. Later on, the first person asked, 'Who are you going to give it to?' The man didn't reply at all. He just tucked the bracelet away."

Xiang Shu looked questioningly at him.

"Xiang Shu, why do you think the man didn't say anything?"

Now Xiang Shu looked outright confused. He mulled over it. "He was mute?"

This took Chen Xing completely off guard. He laughed until his stomach hurt and he had to sit down on the side of the road. Xiang Shu had no idea why. When he'd recovered, Chen Xing explained the story once more.

"Who paid?" asked Xiang Shu.

"The mute did."

"Doesn't that mean the gift was already given? The money was all the mute's."

"Oh," Chen Xing said, suddenly enlightened. "So it's like *that*."

"And maybe the mute was conflicted too. Why didn't the other person give him the bracelet first?"

"Ah, I understand." Chen Xing laughed. "You mean the mute was waiting for the other person to give him a bracelet first, so he was conflicted?"

Xiang Shu made an equivocal hand gesture: He couldn't say for sure; Chen Xing could interpret it however he wanted.

"But why didn't the mute give the other person the bracelet, huh?" Chen Xing pressed. "He clearly liked the other person."

Xiang Shu was resolute. "It sounds like that girl was taking—"

"Man. He was a youth, a young man who didn't understand anything."

Xiang Shu let out an "oh" and thought for a while. "That young man was taking the mute's love for him for granted. He wanted to wait until the mute couldn't resist giving it to him first. The mute, however, had already done his part by buying the bracelets—isn't that proof enough of his feelings? Affection is a matter for two people. Why did the young man take advantage of the mute like that?"

"Where did that come from?" Chen Xing demanded, suddenly irate. "That young man simply didn't know! He liked the mute too!"

"Then why didn't he say it?" Xiang Shu asked, perplexed. Why was Chen Xing taking this discussion of other people's matters so seriously? This man was simply baffling.

“He thought the mute didn’t love him.” Chen Xing paused, thinking. “He…um, he was sick and wouldn’t live much longer.”

Xiang Shu drew his brows together. “Why do you keep adding more and more messy circumstances to this story? Why didn’t you make all of this clear at the start?”

“It’s about two people’s feelings—of course it isn’t clear. Just forget it!” Chen Xing stormed away, furious.

“What’s the matter?” Xiang Shu asked, more puzzled than ever. *He was fine at first, then suddenly turned hostile. Wait, don’t tell me this kid is sick?* He caught up to Chen Xing and sized him up. “Are you…”

“I’m not sick!” Chen Xing clarified hastily. “That young man isn’t me; this is just a situation I heard about once.”

“Then why are you angry?”

“I’m not angry. Who said I was angry? Oh, we’re here. It’s better for us to wait for Feng-dage to come out and meet us, right?”

“Perhaps,” Xiang Shu said evenly, still trailing behind Chen Xing, “it was because he had unfulfilled dreams or worries about personal gains or losses, or even self-esteem issues. The man feared he’d be rejected as soon as he spoke up, so he didn’t want to take that step. As you said, there’s nothing clear about matters of the heart.”

The previous night, when they decided to split up, Feng Qianjun had agreed to meet them once a day to exchange information. If something kept them from meeting, they’d decided they’d have to find another way to get in touch.

Chen Xing and Xiang Shu had been walking around blindly, but they’d nonetheless managed to reach the agreed-upon meeting place in the Han district, a music hall located in the north of the city.

Though its proprietor was a Han, many Hu also came to the music hall to enjoy music and each other’s company. The moment the Great Chanyu arrived, Hu men flooded out of private booths with their wives and children to salute him. The shopkeeper went to get a private booth ready for them as well, and before long, they were seated.

“This music is awful,” Chen Xing remarked. “Can you play any musical instruments?”

When he heard this question, Xiang Shu became briefly disoriented; a lot of things came to his mind at once, but they were all too hazy to grab hold of. He nodded absently, then realized what he was doing and quickly corrected himself. “No, I can’t.”

“Oh, I’m sure you can,” Chen Xing said. “I saw you nod!”

Xiang Shu looked at him and said nothing.

Chen Xing called over the waiter and asked to borrow a guqin. He tuned the instrument, then said to Xiang Shu, “This is a piece of music I once heard. I don’t know its origin, but I think it’s from the land beyond the pass… Maybe you’ll recognize it?”

Ever since their conversation in the market, Xiang Shu had been frowning a little, lost in thought. He forgot to even turn to face Chen Xing and just kept staring at the courtyard down below the private booth, as if in a trance. But when Chen Xing began to play, Xiang Shu looked over abruptly, a change coming over his face.

Chen Xing was playing the Fusheng Melody, albeit hesitantly. The whole rest of the building went quiet. Xiang Shu’s knitted brow slowly relaxed as he watched Chen Xing, who was engrossed in his playing.

After a time, Chen Xing glanced at Xiang Shu, a question in his eyes. Instead of replying, Xiang Shu got up and moved to stand behind Chen Xing.

Chen Xing nearly gasped; his heart went wild. Xiang Shu leaned over him, draping one hand over his shoulder and reaching for the guqin’s strings with the other. Thus embracing him, Xiang Shu covered Chen Xing’s fingers with his own and pressed them onto the strings.

Xiang Shu’s breath was close enough to brush Chen Xing’s ear. Like moving clouds and flowing water, the notes became its company, tying the whole melody together.

“You can play the guqin?” Chen Xing tilted his head back, shocked—and inadvertently brought their faces so close together that they were nearly kissing.

An unnatural expression came over Xiang Shu's face, and he quickly let go of Chen Xing's hands and went back to his own seat on the other side of the table.

"You *can* play the guqin!" Chen Xing felt like an idiot. Xiang Shu had never told him.

Xiang Shu looked displeased. "What?"

"I thought you would…play the Qiang flute or something…"

"My mother was a Han," Xiang Shu told him, sounding very prissy.

Chen Xing racked his brain, thinking of all the time they had spent together, but no—not once in those three years had Xiang Shu shown any indication that he could play the guqin. He had even had Chen Xing teach him, when Chen Xing had the time.

So it was all an act! Chen Xing found he didn't know what to say.

As it turned out, he didn't have to say anything. A woman's smiling voice greeted them from behind the compartment. "The Great Chanyu's melodies have spread far and wide outside the pass. Legend has it that when he plays the Qiang flute, even passing wild geese descend to the ground to listen."

…*Princess Qinghe? What's she doing here?* Chen Xing frowned, but said nothing.

"They descended because I shot them all down," Xiang Shu said indifferently.

For a moment, Chen Xing didn’t know whether to be more amazed at Xiang Shu or Princess Qinghe, who emerged from behind the screen, her eyes bright and her face as fresh as the spring breeze. She approached Xiang Shu and gave him a slight salute, which Xiang Shu acknowledged with a nod. Xiang Shu’s eyes then fell on the Han man behind her.

It was Feng Qianyi. They finally met again.

Chen Xing sized Feng Qianyi up, thinking, *Good thing we didn’t talk about exorcist matters here*. Xiang Shu did a double take at the sight of Feng Qianyi, but didn’t ask what he and Princess Qinghe were doing there.

“When word spread that the Great Chanyu was in town,” Princess Qinghe said, “all of Chang’an’s aristocrats ran to the palace with portraits of their unwed daughters and sisters. Little did any of us know that the Great Chanyu had actually snuck out for a tryst in a music hall.”

Xiang Shu maintained that same indifferent tone. “You should return to the palace, Qinghe. If Jiantou can’t find you, he’ll send out a search party.”

Princess Qinghe smiled. “He’s with Wang Ziye, so he definitely won’t come looking for me. But your message is received; we’ll leave you alone.” With that, she and Feng Qianyi left the private booth.

Chen Xing turned his head to look at the color of the sky past the railing. Feng Qianjun still hadn’t shown up; maybe he was taking advantage of his brother being out to steal the Yin Yang Mirror. “Shall we wait a bit longer?”

“I have to leave. There’s something I need to do,” said Xiang Shu. “You—”

“What do you need to do? I’m going with you, obviously! Who else is going to protect me?”

Xiang Shu paused, looking conflicted. “Then you must do as I say,” he said in the end. “Don’t cause any trouble.”

“Okay!” Chen Xing chirped obediently.

Xiang Shu got up and looked downstairs. Chen Xing followed his gaze and looked around curiously, wondering what he was going to do. Then Xiang Shu unfastened his own belt and started to strip.

Who just gets undressed halfway through a conversation?!

Xiang Shu shrugged his arms and torso out of his outer robe, fastened his belt again, and secured the dangling sleeves of his outer robe into a knot around his waist. This revealed the top half of his black undergarment and disguised the fact that he was wearing royal robes. Moving on, he spread out his left hand and slipped off the rings before passing them all to Chen Xing, telling him to store them away properly.

"Hold onto me," he said.

Oh, that's exactly what I want! That's what I've been yearning for! Chen Xing flung his arms around Xiang Shu in a hug.

Xiang Shu was flabbergasted. They looked at each other. "Not around the waist…" Xiang Shu clarified.

"Oh." Chen Xing readjusted so that his arms were around Xiang Shu's neck instead.

Xiang Shu secured Chen Xing in one arm, then turned around, ran several swift steps, and leaped off the second floor of the music hall.

It should probably have terrified Chen Xing, but instead, he just felt light. Xiang Shu caught a tile with one hand and used it to propel them upward. One foot briefly alighted on the fence of the third floor balcony to gather momentum, and then the other kicked off one of the building's wooden pillars as he flew away without a sound. Holding Chen Xing tight, he flipped over and scaled the eaves, then followed the path of Feng Qianyi's departure under the deep purple twilight.

His qinggong is soooo awesome! Chen Xing thought. Xiang Shu had climbed the building one-handed, without even seeming to have to think very hard about it.

"How on earth did you get so good at kung fu?" Chen Xing asked in a low voice.

"Want to learn?" Xiang Shu asked casually. He released Chen Xing from his arm and tugged him along by the hand instead. Crouching slightly as they ran, they pursued the departing carriage on the street below, watching it intently.

"Are your archery skills this incredible?"

“They’re not bad.”

“Then teach me mounted archery when you have the time. How’s that?”

Xiang Shu shot him a glance, but carried on towing him along the rooftops at lightning speed without replying. It wasn’t long before they overtook the carriage and stopped ahead of it, still high above. The carriage had come to a stop at the northern corner of an empty street, and as they watched, a man approached it and climbed inside. The carriage moved again, and after a while, the same man got out and walked away.

Chen Xing suddenly remembered something. “Do you want to find out what Princess Qinghe and…that man…were talking about?” he asked in a low voice.

Xiang Shu hummed. Chen Xing reminded himself that Xiang Shu, who’d forgotten the past, didn’t know Feng Qianyi was Feng Qianjun’s older brother, or that the Yin Yang Mirror was in the Feng family’s possession. There were a lot of things they hadn’t told him.

It was clear that Feng Qianyi and Princess Qinghe had been conspiring in the music hall, exchanging some kind of secret information, until Xiang Shu and Chen Xing had arrived and were seated nearby. The long silence before they made their presence known probably meant that they’d been communicating silently, perhaps by dipping their fingers in tea and using it to write on the table. Still, Xiang Shu was perceptive, and it would’ve only been a matter of time before he’d notice who was behind the partition next to him. Knowing a single glance from him would expose her presence, Princess Qinghe had chosen to come out and greet him proactively rather than risk rousing his suspicion.

So what were she and Feng Qianyi discussing? Odds were that Princess Qinghe had been conveying an order. If so, Feng Qianyi would have gone to carry out a task of some sort after he departed. Sure enough, he had dispatched a messenger.

“The Murong family has been planning a rebellion for a long time,” Xiang Shu explained.

Down below, the messenger left the street and moved quickly into a quiet alley where a horse had been hidden. But before the messenger could

mount his horse, a shadow flew down from the eaves and struck the back of the man's neck with his palm, knocking him out cold.

Chen Xing climbed down to the ground and looked at the messenger in alarm. Xiang Shu hauled the man up and tossed him into the depths of the alley, which woke him back up. He stared at Xiang Shu and Chen Xing, his face brimming with shock.

"Do you want to hand him over to Fu Jian?" Chen Xing asked. Xiang Shu stood tall and straight, as if considering the matter. "If you hand him over to Fu Jian, Qinghe will…be in danger. You should think it through."

Xiang Shu threw a look at Chen Xing, but said nothing.

Chen Xing eyed the messenger up. "What did Feng Qianyi want you to do? If you explain, you might survive this."

Xiang Shu frowned. "Feng Qianyi?"

It took until dusk, but Feng Qianjun finally managed to get the proprietor at the Songbai Residence drunk so he could steal the key to the underground storeroom.

"Ugh, too much wine," Feng Qianjun muttered. He'd drunk so much he had a headache. If he'd known what a heavyweight the proprietor was, he would've brought knockout drugs instead—though that would definitely have alerted the proprietor that something fishy was going on once he woke up again. The only way to get the key, steal the Yin Yang Mirror, and then return the key later with no one the wiser was to get him drunk.

But the proprietor had taken about a thousand cups to succumb. What a waste of Feng Qianjun's time.

Feng Qianjun used the key to open the door to the storeroom. Holding a lamp in one hand, he went through the cash storeroom and then the silver storeroom before finally reaching the gold storeroom in the deepest part of the place. Once he arrived in front of the Taiji Lock, he fished out the blueprint Chen Xing had given to him and used it to decipher the lock on the door.

There was a light *click*. Feng Qianjun pushed open the door to the secret room. He picked up the lamp and held it up to illuminate the room.

There was nothing inside. Everything that had been there three years ago was gone.

For a long moment, Feng Qianjun just stood there. Then, behind him, his brother’s voice said, “Xiaodi, are you looking for this?”

Feng Qianjun whirled around. With a loud rumble, the Yin Yang Mirror spewed out enough black qi to devour the heavens, and Feng Qianjun was sucked inside.

Chapter 96

"SPEAK CLEARLY!" Xiang Shu ground out. "What did you say about Feng Qianyi?!"

"Wait! Let me explain! Uh…what do we do with this messenger?"

They were outside Chang'an. Chen Xing was shuffling along, half dragging and half carrying the messenger, whom they'd stuffed into a burlap sack. They came to a desolated stone building, the former imperial mausoleum of the Jin dynasty. Despite the southward migration a few decades prior, the royal mausoleum had yet to be relocated. Fu Jian, of course, would never be so crass as to send his subordinates to rob the previous dynasty's graves, so the mausoleum, as well as the nearby residences where the grave keepers stayed, had been left untouched.

Finally sick of watching Chen Xing struggling to drag the messenger along, Xiang Shu picked the messenger up and unceremoniously tossed him down in front of the mausoleum.

Chen Xing had left Sima Wei at the mausoleum for two reasons: first because it was unlikely anyone would come near this place, and second because even if they did and they happened to spot him, they would convince themselves they'd just seen a ghost. Likewise, it wouldn't do for Chen Xing and Xiang Shu to bring this messenger back to the palace, so they'd resorted to dragging him here.

"Sima Wei! Are you here?" Chen Xing shouted. Belatedly, he noticed that someone had been keeping the place nice and tidy. Sima Wei had even put together a fair few lanterns from a bit of paper and some thin bamboo sticks he'd scavenged from the mountain. He'd stuck candles in them to bathe the entire mausoleum in a warm glow.

When he heard Chen Xing calling for him, Sima Wei emerged and came over, studying the two of them.

"Explain everything," Xiang Shu said unhappily, "or I'll kick your ass!"

Still such an explosive temper. Chen Xing weighed his options and decided on the truth. “All right, I’ll tell you. This whole time, we’ve actually suspected that the man you’re looking for, Kjera, is Wang Ziye. Fu Jian’s trusted advisor.”

Xiang Shu blinked.

Chen Xing knew that if he didn’t tell Xiang Shu the truth now, he was going to get beaten up. “Let me explain.”

“Then explain!”

Chen Xing sucked in a deep breath and started to tell Xiang Shu everything that had happened, beginning with Shi Hai’s plan to revive Chiyou. He didn’t get far, however, before Xiang Shu’s expression suddenly changed and he gestured for Chen Xing to pause. He was suddenly seeing connections between several events that had previously seemed unrelated.

Sima Wei sat next to them and listened as Chen Xing explained it all to Xiang Shu—the Feng family and Princess Qinghe’s revenge, the strangeness of the Yin Yang Mirror after it had been corrupted by resentment. Xiang Shu took it all in, frowning. “It sounds complicated,” Chen Xing concluded, “but basically, Feng Qianyi is one of Wang Ziye’s subordinates. The reason I didn’t bring it up before is…all right, it’s because Feng Qianyi is Feng Qianjun’s brother. I wasn’t intentionally hiding this from you. Feng Qianjun just…wants to try resolving this on his own first.”

Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun had discussed the question of whether to tell Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu, they reasoned, had just been released from prison, and there was no guarantee that he would accept all the complicated information they were telling him at face value. Moreover, Xiang Shu’s determination to avenge his father could be a liability; they feared that if he knew who Wang Ziye was, he would run off after him the moment they reached Chang’an. It would make a lot of problems for them if Wang Ziye got spooked and ran off before they could steal the Yin Yang Mirror.

It was possible that Feng Qianjun was hoping to steer his brother down a different path, too. They were all outsiders in Xiang Shu’s eyes, and when Xiang Shu learned that Feng Qianjun’s brother was one of Shi Hai’s dogs, he would probably mistrust him.

Xiang Shu took all of this in in silence. Chen Xing was surprised to see that he appeared to believe it all unreservedly. His behavior now was like night and day compared to the swift judgment he'd initially made when he learned they'd been keeping things from him. Chen Xing was just waiting for Xiang Shu to ask how they knew all of this; the moment he did, Chen Xing would tell him that they had lived through much of this once already. But Xiang Shu didn't ask.

Chen Xing tried to explain himself. "I think that, because this is something you're investigating too, I feared you wouldn't be able to keep our identities secret and Wang Ziye would find out. We're doing this all covertly for now, so…"

"I'm not a rabid dog," Xiang Shu replied, frowning. "Forget it. I'll settle the score with you once we get back!"

After a moment's thought, Xiang Shu stepped forward to uncover the messenger's head. He then sat down to one side, striking a pose so stern and intimidating it terrified the messenger.

Chen Xing froze the moment he saw the messenger's face. It was Yuwen Xin! He had caught only a quick glimpse of the messenger back in the alley, and it had been too dark to make out his features. Now, under the light of the lamps, Yuwen Xin's face was plain as day.

"You…you?" Chen Xing stammered.

"You know him?" asked Xiang Shu.

Yuwen Xin studied Chen Xing suspiciously. It had been many years since they last met, and these were strange circumstances for a reunion; it was no surprise that he didn't recognize Chen Xing. He didn't recognize Xiang Shu either, of course, this being his first visit to Chang'an. For a long, strained moment, none of them spoke.

"N…no," Chen Xing said finally. "I don't know him."

He steeled himself and released a sigh, walking off to one side. He needed to calm down. Xiang Shu could tell that something was up with him, but he didn't pry. Instead, he asked Yuwen Xin coldly, "What did Feng Qianyi tell you to do?"

Yuwen Xin opened his mouth, clearly about to insist that he was being wrongfully accused. Realizing this, Xiang Shu walked forward and pinched one of his wrists between his index and middle fingers. He applied a bit of pressure, and Yuwen Xin yelped in pain.

“Who are you people?!” Yuwen Xin cried. “Let go! Heavens, let go!”

Xiang Shu kept up the pressure. He was using only those two fingers, but it was almost enough to snap Yuwen Xin’s wrist. “I’m very busy, and I don’t have time to waste talking to you,” he said darkly. “If you don’t tell me the truth, I’ll break your arms and legs and leave you here.”

This guy was crazy! Yuwen Xin begged for mercy. “I’ll speak, I’ll speak! Feng Qianyi told me to go to Chi Le Chuan and tell Zhou Zhen that the plan has changed. I’m supposed to tell him to ignore Carosha, and that we don’t care about the antlers anymore! He needs to get the Rouran first…”

Xiang Shu stilled. Chen Xing spun back around, thoroughly shaken. “What?” they asked in unison.

Xiang Shu was surprised to hear that Feng Qianyi’s plot had something to do with Chi Le Chuan, and that Yuwen Xin had mentioned Zhou Zhen—a dead man. Chen Xing, meanwhile, was shocked that Shi Hai had changed his plans.

Yuwen Xin gasped for breath. “Feng Qianyi said that his lord requires more drought fiends. The more the better. He wants Zhou Zhen to take action immediately instead of waiting for the White Deer to die!”

Suddenly, it all became clear to Chen Xing—the intricate, complicated plan that Wang Ziye had set up the last time they were in Chang’an.

“What does Zhou Zhen look like?” Xiang Shu asked severely.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him before. I only know his name—*ahhh*!”

Yuwen Xin let out a heartrending cry. Xiang Shu had experienced a brief lapse in emotional control and snapped his wrist.

“Stop! Let go of him!” Chen Xing cried. Yuwen Xin’s face was streaked with snot and tears, and he looked on the verge of passing out.

“You broke his arm!”

Xiang Shu released Yuwen Xin, but otherwise ignored them both. “Zhou Zhen’s still alive?” he murmured to himself.

Chen Xing set Yuwen Xin’s wrist for him, and Yuwen Xin gave him a feeble nod. “Thank you…thank you,” he sobbed. “You’re a good person.”

“Who is giving commands to Feng Qianyi?” Chen Xing asked, as Xiang Shu got to his feet.

“I don’t know.” Yuwen Xin’s face was set in a bitter cast. “All I know is…I need to carry out my orders as they are given. Princess Qinghe told me to follow Feng Qianyi’s orders, and after we accomplish our goal, she will reward me as I deserve…”

“What is your name?” Xiang Shu demanded, unfeeling. He hadn’t been interested in the man’s identity up to this point, given that he was only a messenger, but now, something about the way Chen Xing was acting gave him pause.

“Yu-Yuwen Xin. I’m from the Yuwen family.”

Xiang Shu remembered now—Fu Jian had implied that Yuwen Xin was the one responsible for Chen Xing’s parents’ deaths. And there was no hint of surprise from Chen Xing when he heard the name, meaning he already knew who they were dealing with.

“What do we do now?” Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu followed the plan he’d had in mind when they brought this messenger to the Jin mausoleum. He handed Yuwen Xin over to Sima Wei with strict instructions to keep an eye on him and ensure he didn’t die, escape, or send any messages to the outside. With that, he took Chen Xing back to the palace in Chang’an.

When they reached the palace, Xiang Shu led Chen Xing back into the room they’d slept in the night before. Seeing Yuwen Xin again had left Chen Xing out of sorts, feeling a complicated tangle of emotions. When he met Xiang Shu’s eyes, he saw Xiang Shu’s irritated confusion.

“Sorry that there were so many things I didn’t tell you,” Chen Xing said. “I didn’t mean anything bad by it. I just felt that…maybe it was better

for you not to know.”

Xiang Shu frowned petulantly, studying Chen Xing. “Like this matter with Yuwen Xin?”

Chen Xing remembered Xiang Shu acting like this last time too. After Chen Xing had learned how his parents died, Xiang Shu had been ambushed in the street on his way to find Chen Xing at the Songbai Residence, then grabbed Chen Xing by the collar and shouted at him without giving him a chance to explain.

“If you want to hit me, then do it,” Chen Xing said tiredly.

Xiang Shu’s frown deepened. “I just said that in the heat of the moment. Why would I hit you?”

Chen Xing sat down on the bed, dejected. A moment later, Xiang Shu sat down next to him, close enough that their shoulders brushed.

“Xin-ge and I were really good friends when we were young,” Chen Xing said in a soft voice. “I actually don’t know Tuoba Yan.”

Xiang Shu did not speak, allowing Chen Xing to continue.

“When I first learned what he’d done, I couldn’t believe it. Xin-ge caused my father’s death.”

Still Xiang Shu remained silent. When he turned to look at Chen Xing, he saw desolation and sorrow on his face. He wrapped an arm around Chen Xing’s shoulder and pulled him into a gentle hug, and then Chen Xing could hold out no longer; he turned, buried his face in Xiang Shu’s chest, and sobbed.

“My father died because of Kjera,” Xiang Shu said. “My parents have both passed on, and I’m alone in the world now. Who could just let something like that go? That night, when I heard what Fu Jian said, I knew that you’d never forgotten. You just forced a laugh.”

Suddenly, they heard Tuoba Yan’s voice outside the door. “Great Chanyu, you’ve returned?”

Xiang Shu scowled. He was sitting on the bed, hugging Chen Xing while they talked quietly to each other, but they had forgotten to close the door and now here Tuoba Yan was looking for them. He was still holding

the leash for the dog they had asked him to walk. Chen Xing sat up immediately and composed himself, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

“Get out!” Xiang Shu said peevishly.

Tuoba Yan dropped the dog’s leash, bowed, and took his leave. The dog trotted in, tail wagging, and looked at Xiang Shu before turning to study Chen Xing. It hopped a few times, then leaped right into Chen Xing’s arms and began licking him, making him chuckle.

“Tomorrow, I’ll have to find Qinghe and have a talk with her,” Xiang Shu said after a moment’s thought. “Let’s go to bed after we have our dinner.”

Chen Xing had stopped talking. Xiang Shu had always been dependable, and he had immediately recovered his composure after the brief shock of hearing Zhou Zhen’s name earlier; that probably meant he already had a plan. Chen Xing didn’t ask any more questions. The only concern still lingering in his mind was the fact that they had not managed to connect with Feng Qianjun—but they already knew where the Yin Yang Mirror was, so it wasn’t like things could go completely awry. It was okay to leave that for tomorrow.

With that thought, he fell asleep quickly.

When he woke the next day, it was to another commotion in the room beyond the screen. Still bleary with sleep, Chen Xing heard Xiang Shu out there speaking long-windedly in Tiele to a group of people. His pronunciations were clear, and the rise and fall of his cadence was pleasing to listen to, but he spoke so rapidly that Chen Xing couldn’t understand what he was saying.

Chen Xing emerged from behind the screen to find the hall packed with Hu nobles who had come to propose marriage. Xiang Shu had only gotten about halfway through what he was saying when he was interrupted by Chen Xing’s appearance, and everyone turned to stare at Chen Xing.

Chen Xing blinked, confused.

In the Tiele language, Xiang Shu said, “Just…deal with it like I said. Take these pictures back, and this tea, well, it won’t be drunk. Thank you

for your good intentions…but please…choose another son-in-law, all of you.”

Chen Xing noticed that Xiang Shu had developed an uncharacteristic stutter the moment he appeared. It made him immediately suspicious. Following Xiang Shu’s pronouncement, all of the people in the hall glared at Chen Xing, radiating hostility, and then rose to leave.

“Send the tea and the portraits back with them!” Xiang Shu told one of the attendants.

The attendant looked up and studied Chen Xing, then turned his gaze back to Xiang Shu. He bowed and cleared away the things on the table.

At midmorning, Chen Xing and Xiang Shu sat facing each other across the table. Xiang Shu wore a royal robe and sat writing a letter; Chen Xing was eating breakfast. He noticed that Xiang Shu was using a brush of sheep wool to write and that his Tiele script was written in a neat, well-formed hand, nothing like what you’d expect of someone who practiced martial arts. Chen Xing was surprised to see it.

“You can read it?” Xiang Shu asked, noticing his gaze.

Chen Xing knew how to speak Tiele, but not read it; he recognized only a small handful of words. “You write really prettily. It’s all neat and organized.”

“My Han characters don’t look as good.”

Chen Xing sipped his milk tea. “You use the brush well, so whatever you write will look good.”

“My mother taught me,” Xiang Shu said.

Chen Xing nodded. “Who are you writing to?”

“This will be sent back to Chi Le Chuan,” Xiang Shu said easily, “to Tribe Leader Shi Mokun. I’m telling him to be wary of Zhou Zhen.”

Previously, Chen Xing would have thought that hearing Zhou Zhen’s name would send Xiang Shu running back to Chi Le Chuan. He wouldn’t have expected Xiang Shu to keep his cool like this. Chen Xing, of course,

already knew who Zhou Zhen was, but he asked the question that he knew was expected of him. “Who’s Zhou Zhen?”

“Ah, so you’ve finally remembered that little issue,” Xiang Shu said teasingly. Chen Xing protested that he’d wanted to ask the night before, but Xiang Shu waved him off; apparently, no explanation was needed. “My anda’s lover, a man who has been dead for several years already.”

Chen Xing blinked.

Xiang Shu sealed the letter and pressed a wax seal to it before he noticed Chen Xing’s expression. Chen Xing was surprised that Xiang Shu was being so direct and forthcoming, but Xiang Shu misunderstood. Thinking that Chen Xing was shocked to hear about a relationship between two men, he added casually, “Yes, they’re both men. We Hu are not like you Han; we like whoever we like.”

“No, no, that wasn’t why I was surprised. Your anda—aren’t you worried for him, if this Zhou Zhen was his lover?”

“I trust him.”

The matter apparently settled, Xiang Shu waved an attendant over and told him to hand the letter to Tuoba Yan, who would then dispatch a messenger. Between this and the dog walking, it seemed Tuoba Yan had become Xiang Shu’s errand boy. Chen Xing had been worried for a while about what Che Luofeng’s side was up to, but he was comforted by having intercepted Yuwen Xin—Feng Qianyi’s messenger—before he could head to Chi Le Chuan. That meant Zhou Zhen had no idea what had happened in Chang’an and wouldn’t make any unexpected movements for a while.

Last time, they had stayed in Chang’an until autumn and only then returned to Chi Le Chuan. That gave them lots of time to work with in this iteration; they just had to deal with Wang Ziye, and then nothing would happen to Chi Le Chuan.

As Chen Xing mulled this over, he noticed Xiang Shu watching him. Chen Xing tilted his head questioningly.

Xiang Shu gestured to the other letter on the table, telling Chen Xing to look at it. Chen Xing tore it open and found that it was from Fu Jian, who was requesting Chen Xing’s presence in the imperial study for a chat. Separately, Xiang Shu had to go see Princess Qinghe that day, so they

agreed that once Chen Xing had been released from his meeting with the emperor, he would go find Xiang Shu.

"Fu Jian is up to no good," Xiang Shu warned him. "Don't just blindly agree to anything he says."

"No need to worry about that," said Chen Xing, smiling.

In the imperial study, things went exactly as they had the last time, except that Wang Ziye didn't appear. It was, Chen Xing was realizing, exactly as Chong Ming, the phoenix, had said—even in all this chaos and darkness, the great wheels of fate and the heaven and earth veins did hold some sort of strange power. Destiny was self-correcting after it'd been twisted by the Dinghai Pearl. Events were happening just as they were fated to.

Changing factors, countless tiny variables, each a grain of sand they were piling up into a tower… Chen Xing mulled over Chong Ming's words, thinking that they hadn't seen the phoenix since their arrival in Chang'an.

Fu Jian, meanwhile, was smiling playfully at Chen Xing. "We're told that this morning, the Great Chanyu rejected all of the aristocratic families who came to him to propose marriage. There's no time like the present, so why don't you let Us marry the two of you so that you can carry out the qinglu ceremony properly?"

Even on this go-round, Chen Xing thought, *you're still bored and idle enough to enjoy playing matchmaker?* "No, thanks. It's not often I receive a summons for a personal audience with an emperor. Was this all you wanted to discuss?"

Even as he spoke to Fu Jian, his gaze was fixed on the two pennants hanging behind Fu Jian's back, on the wall of the imperial study—the Zouyu Banner and the White Tiger Banner. He needed to find a way to convince Fu Jian to give them to him, so that he could keep them out of Wang Ziye's grasp.

Fu Jian gave a little chuckle. "Shulü Kong is like a brother to Us. We understand his thoughts."

You understand nothing, Chen Xing thought. *If you understood, then your enormous army would have been enough, and Xiang Shu wouldn't have cut off your chances of escape under the shadow of Yique.*

"You are aware, of course, that half of the blood that runs through the Great Chanyu's veins is Han?" said Fu Jian.

Chen Xing nodded and drank the milk tea. His thoughts were not on Fu Jian, though, and he kept glancing at the pennants on the wall.

"Four years ago, when Shulü Kong took up the title of Great Chanyu, We made a journey to Chi Le Chuan to congratulate him. We asked Shulü Kong then about his plans for finding a partner and getting married. To this day, We remember his response clearly… Why do you keep looking behind Us?"

Chen Xing smiled. "Those two pennants—are they the Jin people's? I thought I recognized them, so I haven't been able to stop glancing at them."

Fu Jian made a noise of understanding. Chen Xing couldn't decide on a plan of action. He could probably get his hands on the pennants if he got Xiang Shu to ask Fu Jian for them—but Wang Ziye definitely knew the artifacts' power, and their disappearance would rouse his suspicions. That would make things trickier for them in the long run.

Fu Jian resumed his monologue. "What Shulü Kong told me then was, 'I have an idea of who I want to spend the rest my life with. I do not need you to worry about that.'"

"Mm." Chen Xing was still thinking.

"We asked him, 'Then what kind of person do you see yourself marrying?' Shulü Kong didn't say, but We imagine it must be a Han, like you."

"Like me, huh," Chen Xing said distractedly. He made up his mind. "Your Majesty, may I ask you for something?"

"Did you listen to a thing We just said?" Fu Jian asked. "You want those two Jin-era national treasures, right? How about this: If you agree to one of Our terms, then We will—"

Tuoba Yan's voice interrupted them from outside. "The Great Chanyu has arrived."

Their negotiations came to an abrupt halt. Xiang Shu walked straight into the imperial study, frowning slightly and foregoing any greetings, and found a place to sit.

He gestured for them to continue, so Fu Jian did. “If you want Our things—”

Xiang Shu interrupted, looking at Chen Xing. “What do you want?”

“Well,” Chen Xing said, “it’s nothing, really. Just those two ragged pieces of cloth…”

“Pull them down and give them to him.”

“Don’t!” Chen Xing said hastily, scared that a fight might break out. “I don’t need them!”

Fu Jian’s expression curdled, but he couldn’t afford to offend Xiang Shu just yet; he still needed to ask Xiang Shu for the Purple Scroll. And what were those two old strips of fabric next to the Purple Scroll of Golden Conferment? “Just take them.”

“Thank you!” Chen Xing exclaimed, blooming with joy. “All I can do with them is take them back to hang up on another wall, but all the same, they’re very important to me. My apologies, Your Majesty; I did not intend to cause offense. You’re too generous. If anyone tries to tell me that you’re up to no good, I’ll set them straight!”

Fu Jian called in Tuoba Yan, who rolled up the White Tiger Banner and Zouyu Banner as one. He put them into a box and handed it to Chen Xing.

“In truth, We didn’t even care about the Han’s imperial jade seal,” Fu Jian said dourly. “We imagine that if these pennants were all that was needed to protect your country and your people, then the Jin would not have fled south in such a panic.”

These words got Chen Xing’s hackles up, but it was fine if Fu Jian wanted to reclaim some face by insulting him; Chen Xing had the artifacts now. He stowed the box away.

“No need to thank him,” Xiang Shu said. “Jiantou, you’ve been generous, but I don’t intend to take your things and give you nothing in return. I will gift you three thousand Barkol Gales, which are noble colts

from the wild horses that mate in the mountain ranges on moonlit nights. Send your people to Chi Le Chuan to retrieve them."

Fu Jian had wanted those horses for a long time; he had to summon all of his composure to suppress his joy. "Why does it feel now like We have gained an unfair advantage? Ah, well, there's no harm in helping to fulfill another couple's happy affairs…"

Chen Xing saw his opportunity. "If that's all settled, then we should take our leave so that we can walk our dog. Your Majesty, we beg your pardon."

"Wait," said Fu Jian. Foiled, Chen Xing sat down again, and they all looked at each other.

"What now, Jiantou?" Xiang Shu asked unhappily. "Whose happy affairs are you fulfilling now?"

Fu Jian smiled again. "Before you came in, we were discussing the conversation you and I had on the day you took over the role of Great Chanyu."

"Every person in Chi Le Chuan came to speak to me that day. I don't remember what you said."

"We cannot recall what other people said that day either, but the only thing We discussed with you was the Han people. Don't you like Han—"

"Hey!" Xiang Shu protested. He looked annoyed, as if Fu Jian had let something slip that he shouldn't have.

Chen Xing's heart skipped a beat. Tuoba Yan, Fu Jian and his Five Hu, and even the Hu people outside the pass all seemed to hold some respect for the Han people. That was something Chen Xing had learned the last time he came to Chang'an. But, he realized now, he'd never asked Xiang Shu how he felt about the Han. Did Xiang Shu also dream longingly of the Han's ancestral land?

A long time ago, Chen Xing had assumed that Xiang Shu didn't like Han people. Now, he wasn't so sure. Xiang Shu's mother was Han, so why would he disdain them all? Suddenly, after all the years they'd known each other, Chen Xing thought he understood the complicated emotions Xiang Shu had never given voice to:

Xiang Shu had once seen the Han people's territory as his own ancestral land, and he'd been proud of the Han blood in his veins. But when he traveled south, his mother's people arrested him without cause and tossed him in a jail cell to await death. That was why he was so angry. That was why he'd taken some of that anger out on Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing.

Thanks to Fu Jian's meddling, Chen Xing finally understood.

"I'm preparing for a southern campaign," Fu Jian said plainly. "Shulü Kong, do you want to go to Jiangnan?"

Xiang Shu scowled. "Jiantou, you have this perfectly good position as the northern ruler, and you don't appreciate it properly. You'll just be bringing more trouble down on your own head."

"Wang Meng did in fact strongly discourage Us from pursuing a southern campaign," Fu Jian said, "but not long ago, We had a dream. In the dream, We looked out at a broad river, prepared to lead an entire army across it. We stood on one bank, with the whistling wind and an army a million strong at Our back. A mere river's width away stood the weak, puny armies of the southern dynasty. Heaven and earth themselves cowered before the might of Our great army. If Our million cavalrymen struck the surface of the water with their whips, they would have stopped even the raging water. Picture it, Shulü Kong! How grand would that be?"

Fu Jian strode smugly to the middle of the study, facing the map of the Divine Land that had hung there for decades. "North to Karakorum, south to Baiyue—all of that land will be Ours. You and We, hand in hand, shall accomplish a feat that will not be forgotten for tens of thousands of years!"

"Your Majesty…" Chen Xing said, very carefully. "Please permit me an impertinent question. Among the million-man army in your dreams, did you see the Great Chanyu's forces?"

Fu Jian's speech dried up.

Chapter 97

"YOU NEARLY SENT Jiantou into a rage," Xiang Shu remarked.

It was two hours later, in the north market, and they were out walking the dog; Chen Xing was holding the leash. Xiang Shu had changed into casual clothes and wasn't wearing his royal robe—partly to avoid drawing attention and partly for ease of movement. Somehow, though, dressed in Han attire, he looked even more striking and elegant.

"I didn't think you'd wear Han clothing," Chen Xing said.

"I'm half Han," Xiang Shu replied, matter of fact.

Chen Xing sighed. "When the Jin captured you and took you to Xiangyang, you must have been terribly disappointed in them."

"But there are also people like you among the Jin," Xiang Shu said easily. "And I'm not in Xiangyang anymore, am I? The Great Chanyu is magnanimous, and has decided to let it go."

Chen Xing laughed. "And what about Princess Qinghe? How did that go?"

Xiang Shu's face darkened. "I've warned her—if she insists on continuing this, she can't blame me for what happens. It's been too long since we last met, and she's too stubborn. I couldn't convince her."

They headed up to the second floor of the Tingqu music hall as usual and tied the dog to one side. Delighted by his success, Chen Xing took out the White Tiger and Zouyu banners he had procured from Fu Jian to examine them carefully. Xiang Shu looked down at the two tattered pieces of cloth and then up at Chen Xing's joyful expression, the corners of his own lips curving in amusement.

Chen Xing was about to explain, but then he looked up and caught Xiang Shu's smile. "You must be wondering what there is to be so happy about with two old scraps of fabric."

"No. Given how pleased you are, I assume you have your reasons… It's just amusing to see you like this."

“These are two long-lost magical artifacts,” Chen Xing informed him.

Xiang Shu raised an eyebrow as Chen Xing spread out the White Tiger Banner on the table and explained it all to him: The threads embroidered on it were imbued with mana, and the hidden patterns were talismanic symbols. The white tiger and zouyu were both divine beasts… Xiang Shu listened with an occasional half-understanding nod, but for most of the explanation, his attention was fixed on Chen Xing’s face. Clearly, the way Chen Xing’s eyes sparkled in excitement was far more interesting than those two pieces of cloth.

By the time Chen Xing was finished, the sky was growing dark, and there was still no sign of Feng Qianjun. That made two days in a row. Chen Xing was starting to get nervous; they were already two hours past the agreed-upon meeting time.

“I need to go check on him,” Chen Xing muttered to himself. “I hope nothing bad has happened.”

As dusk settled, Xiang Shu and Chen Xing reached the road outside the Songbai Residence with the dog in tow. “If there’s any trouble later,” Chen Xing said, “you’re in charge of protecting me, and I’m in charge of protecting the dog.”

Xiang Shu seemed to have no response to that. He glanced at the dog, which was walking obediently and not barking. Chen Xing knew what he was thinking—that they should send the dog back to the palace. Why bring it along on an investigation?

“I have to insist on this,” Chen Xing said. “Just trust me.” He couldn’t forget the moment when Princess Qinghe had gone mad and stabbed the innocent dog to death, and he was determined not to leave it alone in the palace this time.

Reluctantly, Xiang Shu agreed. Chen Xing led the way, taking a detour through the garden, and Xiang Shu’s brow furrowed. “You’ve been here before?”

“This is a Qi Men Dun Jia array,” Chen Xing replied softly, scanning their surroundings. “Just follow me.”[27]

Soon, Chen Xing found the right path, leaving the garden and arriving at the sliding doors of the brightly lit residence. They heard loud voices on the other side of the door.

“Overthrow Fu Jian! Restore the Great Jin!”

Xiang Shu raised his eyebrows. Peeking inside, Chen Xing whispered, “They’re plotting a rebellion.”

It was bright inside, with Feng Qianyi seated in the center of the group therein, but Feng Qianjun was nowhere to be seen. Xiang Shu grabbed Chen Xing by the collar and beckoned him away from the door.

Chen Xing was familiar with the Songbai Residence by this point, though, and he found another entrance and slipped inside. The long corridor was eerily quiet. When he opened Feng Qianjun’s door, he found the empty room tidy and well-kept.

“It doesn’t look like anyone’s been staying here,” Xiang Shu said, pulling open the folding closet door to reveal an empty wardrobe behind it.

This made no sense to Chen Xing. Feng Qianjun should have been home by now.

Xiang Shu stepped out and took a glance around. “Feng Qianyi’s room is in the main hall. Want to check it out?”

With that, he picked up Chen Xing, and, avoiding the house servants, he headed back outside, climbed the wall, and cut through the garden toward Feng Qianyi’s room.

“Leave the dog out here,” he told Chen Xing. He didn’t want it to cause problems for them inside. Chen Xing left the dog outside and instructed it not to move.

The Songbai Residence was always heavily guarded, but Xiang Shu was so skilled at infiltration that it might as well have been abandoned. With him leading the way, they entered effortlessly and went wherever they pleased. Chen Xing pulled open the sliding door and entered Feng Qianyi’s room, which contained the same desk and soft couch that had been there during their previous visit.

Xiang Shu closed the door behind Chen Xing. The room was lit, and Chen Xing couldn’t hold back an exclamation of surprise when he saw what

was lying on the desk.

The Saber of Harmony and Life!

It was giving off a dark aura, and it had transformed from one blade into two. In just the few short days since they entered Chang'an, it had been reforged. Chen Xing would have known that dark energy anywhere.

"His blades?" Xiang Shu noticed them too and moved as if to pick them up for a closer look. The blades were just sitting on the desk while their owner was nowhere to be found. A dark sense of foreboding came over Chen Xing.

Suddenly, they heard voices outside—Feng Qianyi's meeting had concluded and its attendees were returning to their rooms. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu turned in unison, but the voices were right outside the door; it was too late to leave. Xiang Shu dove under the couch, pulling Chen Xing along with him, and not a moment too soon: They rolled under it just as Feng Qianyi entered.

The space under the couch was cramped. It was tall enough for them both to lie under it, but not at all wide. Xiang Shu lay back, and Chen Xing had to lie on top of him such that their entire bodies were pressed together. He couldn't risk moving, lest he alert Feng Qianyi to his presence. They lay intertwined like that, Xiang Shu embracing Chen Xing tightly, their breaths intermingling, their lips just a hair's breadth apart. Chen Xing turned his head slightly to peer through the gap under the couch. It would take only the slightest movement for Xiang Shu's lips to meet his.

Xiang Shu's breathing grew heavier.

"Shulü Kong has indeed become suspicious," Princess Qinghe muttered, removing her cloak's hood. "That bastard is too nosy. Why should someone with his status care about what Fu Jian does?"

Feng Qianyi didn't reply. He returned to the desk, sat on the floor, and reached out to begin boiling water for tea. "The master has discovered something unexpected and wants to speed up our plans," he said in a low voice. "How are things progressing on your end?"

Princess Qinghe hesitated for a moment and didn't respond.

Chen Xing lay on Xiang Shu's chest, feeling the *thump-thump* of his heartbeat, fast and strong. Something stirred within him, and he turned his head to whisper something into Xiang Shu's ear, but Xiang Shu removed one arm from around Chen Xing to press his fingers gently against Chen Xing's soft lips—he understood.

"I…" Princess Qinghe's voice trembled. "Not yet, Shifu. Chong-er isn't ready."

Feng Qianyi produced a medicine bottle from his robe and poured the contents into the teacup. Chen Xing gasped. Demon God's Blood!

Chen Xing tugged at Xiang Shu's hand, urging him to look. Xiang Shu, who had been holding Chen Xing's hand, unconsciously tightened his grip at the sight of the blood. *Ow, ow, ow!* Chen Xing's expression turned frantic, and Xiang Shu realized what was happening and quickly let go.

The purple-black blood swirled in the cup as Feng Qianyi set it in front of Princess Qinghe. She stared at it for a moment, then said again tremulously, "I…"

"Drink it." Feng Qianyi's voice was cold. "Once you drink it, your mana cultivation will advance rapidly, and through the lord's eyes, you will see the truth of this world for the past ten thousand years."

Princess Qinghe gasped for breath. "I… Shifu, I'm not ready. I…" Now that it had come to this, she suddenly felt a hint of fear.

Feng Qianyi stared intently at her. "Don't you seek revenge? Revenge for your family, for the humiliation that Fu Jian imposed on your clan?"

"This is too fast. Today, Shulü Kong, he…he asked me…"

Chen Xing stirred. What had Xiang Shu said to Qinghe? He turned his head to look at Xiang Shu; Xiang Shu hesitated, as if making a difficult decision, and squeezed Chen Xing's hand. He gestured at the bottom of the couch, telling Chen Xing to stay hidden.

"He asked…" Qinghe's eyes grew distant. "The people that Chong-er and I cherished back then—what would they say, if they were still alive? Would they want me to get vengeance this way?"

Feng Qianyi said nothing.

Qinghe looked up at him, her voice barely above a whisper, “All I want in this life is for Chong-er to be well and to preserve the Murong clan. If we act tonight, if we kill Fu Jian, will it be the same chaos all over again for the families in Chang’an? Will it be like the war when Luoyang fell?”

“Qinghe, you’re afraid,” Feng Qianyi said, enunciating each word clearly.

Princess Qinghe’s thoughts were in turmoil. “I just don’t want to… I don’t want to… Let me think. If we can eliminate Fu Jian alone…”

“Shi Hai-daren guarantees,” Feng Qianyi said in a low voice, “that as long as you can keep Fu Jian under control, there will be no indiscriminate killing. Your clan won’t be in danger; in fact, it will prosper. Drink it, Qinghe. There’s no turning back now.”

When Qinghe continued to hesitate, he took her hand, stared into her eyes, and put the cup in her palm. Inside it, the drop of Demon God’s Blood was still swirling.

Qinghe tried to pull her hand back, but Feng Qianyi murmured, “Drink it, Qinghe. Why are you hesitating now? Isn’t this the moment you’ve been waiting for? *Drink it.*”

She tried to break free of his grasp.

“My lord prepared this just for you,” he whispered, holding fast. “Once you’ve drunk it, all you need to do is return and bed Fu Jian…”

“No. Forget it! I need to leave! Let go of me!”

“Even now, you’re still thinking of—”

“Let her go, you rat.” Xiang Shu’s voice rang out.

Princess Qinghe screamed, Feng Qianyi spun around, and Xiang Shu sprang out from beneath the couch. Scrambling out after him, Chen Xing threw himself at Princess Qinghe.

With a single hand, Xiang Shu grabbed the entire couch—an ebony piece weighing more than three hundred pounds—and swung it in one smooth motion. He struck Feng Qianyi, sending not only him but also the couch, the table, the stove, the teapot, the screen, and the Demon God’s Blood flying. Chen Xing was astonished, though he should have been mentally prepared—this was hardly the first time he’d seen Xiang Shu

fight. There came an enormous crash as Feng Qianyi and the bed busted right through the door and flew out of the room.

“Take Qinghe and go!” Xiang Shu bellowed, furious. “Go back and inform Jiantou!”

Chen Xing grabbed Qinghe’s wrist and scrambled out. By the time he landed, there was no sign of Feng Qianyi; he had vanished in the chaos that had erupted throughout the Songbai Residence. Swordfighters from all corners of the martial world rushed in, shouting, “Assassin! Catch the assassin!”

Xiang Shu stood tall in the courtyard, his hands raised in a fighting stance. He turned his palms over in a swift motion and faced the dozens of martial artists flooding the courtyard, apparently intending to take them all on empty-handed.

“Go that way! You need to return to the palace!” Chen Xing shouted to Princess Qinghe. Her eyes widened, and Chen Xing lowered his voice. “You made the right decision not drinking that stuff. Go back and think about it! Don’t drag your brother into this mess!”

She stared at him. “You…”

“I have to go back and save my dog!”

Behind him, back in the courtyard, someone screamed in pain. Several martial artists already lay strewn across the ground in front of Xiang Shu.

“Xiang Shu!” Chen Xing shouted suddenly. “Hurry! I’ve cornered him!”

Feng Qianyi stepped toward him under the night sky. “Who are you, really?” he asked coldly.

Chen Xing took several steps back, then spread his hands and began forming hand seals, wondering if he should summon the Heart Lamp right then and there.

“Whatever trick you have up your sleeve, you might as well show it now,” Feng Qianyi scoffed. As he spoke, he moved his hand, revealing the Yin Yang Mirror.

There it is!

Chen Xing tried to rush forward to seize the mirror, but he was forced to stop when it released an overpowering blast of resentment that engulfed the courtyard in black mist. Still, Chen Xing only chuckled derisively. “Sorry, but magic has been restored!”

He drew a circle with both hands, and the Heart Lamp’s brilliance surged like a tidal wave. The light clashed violently with the dark energy emanating from the Yin Yang Mirror, producing two massive whirlwinds of force.

Feng Qianyi shouted in terror. Chen Xing had concealed his power so well while he was in Chang’an that Wang Ziye and his faction had no idea what he could do. As the blinding light and resentment collided, Chen Xing pushed the Heart Lamp to its maximum. The resonant sound of a divine bell rang out, the light surged higher, and Feng Qianyi, trying to combat it, was forced to unleash all of the resentment inside the Yin Yang Mirror.

Chen Xing stood firm in the vortex while waves of light and resentment crashed around him. Under the Heart Lamp’s light, the resentment seemed to melt away, like snow purified by flame.

“Stop!” Xiang Shu shouted. “Stop! You’re going to bring this whole place down around us!”

Chen Xing, whose focus had been entirely on unleashing the full extent of his power, looked around and realized that Xiang Shu was right. The surrounding buildings—wooden beams, brick walls—were coming apart under the sheer destructive force, and the commoners inside Songbai Residence were being lifted into the air. Hastily, Chen Xing withdrew the Heart Lamp’s energy. But Feng Qianyi was attempting to absorb Chen Xing’s Heart Lamp energy with the resentment from the mirror, and when Chen Xing let go, the two forces came together in a massive explosion. Then in an instant, all the energy was funneled into the Yin Yang Mirror.

The mirror’s pull didn’t stop. The entire garden was sucked into it, plants, bricks, broken walls, and all. Chen Xing didn’t understand—when had the resentment in the mirror become so powerful?

But there was no time to think about it. Xiang Shu grabbed him and pulled him close, shielding his head. As they spun through the air, Feng Qianyi’s hoarse voice cried out, “Die!”

There came another deafening explosion, and Chen Xing and Xiang Shu were sucked into the mirror.

The resentment dissipated with a final loud bang, revealing the Yin Yang Mirror, now purified. Feng Qianyi, on death's door, tried desperately to activate the artifact. "What…what's going on? Who was that person?"

The only answer he received was a sudden bark. A dog darted in, leaped around him, snatched the mirror in its teeth, and ran off.

Feng Qianyi gaped after it, his hair a disheveled mess. His artifact, snatched by a dog?! "The dog took it again!" he screamed. "Quick, someone catch it! Hurry… Huh?"

In the mirror world, inside Taichu Palace.

Feng Qianjun was bound tightly with rope. Lash marks covered his body. He was on the brink of death. Nearby, Wang Ziye held the yin side of the Yin Yang Mirror in one hand and cast a spell with the other, funneling resentment into the mirror to give Feng Qianyi the fuel he needed to wield it from the outside.

A moment ago, Wang Ziye had felt a tremor in the Yin Yang Mirror. Just what was going on outside that required so much power? There was so much resentment being drawn out from the mirror, Wang Ziye had no choice but to pour all his mana into it to support Feng Qianyi.

"Your companions seem to have come to save you," Wang Ziye murmured, not even sparing a glance at Feng Qianjun. He was looking into the mirror in his hand. "Still not willing to speak the truth?"

"Shi Hai," Feng Qianjun whispered. "You're…done…for…"

Wang Ziye smiled. "I think you'll find that the doomed party here is y—"

He was cut off by a whirlwind erupting from the mirror, carrying hundreds of thousands of pounds of bricks, broken wood, water, and earth —a roaring flood that smashed directly into Wang Ziye's face. It shattered his skull, pierced through the ceiling above, and blasted out the top of Taichu Palace. In its wake, Xiang Shu and Chen Xing emerged from the mirror too.

The whole thing had left Chen Xing disoriented, but Xiang Shu held him tight and spun around. His back slammed into a beam, but then he kicked off it, and with a few swift leaps across the hall, they landed firmly on the ground.

“I’m going to puke,” Chen Xing gasped.

Wang Ziye’s head had exploded, leaving his decapitated body holding the Yin Yang Mirror. A moment later, there was a *thud* as his body crumpled to the ground, and a *clink* as the mirror fell from his hands.

“Save me!” Feng Qianjun called out, but Xiang Shu remained silent. The ground shook with a series of deafening crashes outside the hall. Half of the lumber and foundation of the Songbai Residence crashed down around Taichu Palace.

Chapter 98

"THEY ALREADY KNOW!" Feng Qianjun exclaimed. The moment he was freed, he ran out of the palace and cast about. "Where's my magical artifact?"

"There's no time to get it." Xiang Shu followed him out of the palace and looked up at the sky. Wang Ziye's disembodied soul was shuttling around up there, trailing black flames.

Chen Xing stumbled out after them and was greeted by the sight of hundreds of thousands of drought fiends filling the streets outside the palace—just like last time.

"Who are you?!" Wang Ziye's voice thundered under the sky. "Exorcist? Were you the one who restored all magic? Where is the Dinghai Pearl?!"

Chen Xing looked up at the sky, but didn't answer. Wang Ziye began to laugh his eerie laugh. "No matter; we will learn the answers we seek very soon. Let me see how strong you are—"

"I'm tired of hearing that laughter of yours," Chen Xing cut in coolly. He threw the Yin Yang Mirror to Xiang Shu. "Keep it safe for now!"

Xiang Shu stowed the Yin Yang Mirror away. "We're going back out now?" he asked quietly.

"No," Chen Xing whispered back, bringing both hands close to his body. "Follow me!"

He pushed his hands out again, releasing a bright flash of light. Up in the sky, Wang Ziye cried out in agony as the light dispersed the resentment around him.

"The Heart Lamp!" Wang Ziye roared.

Chen Xing took the chance to rush out of the palace. "Where are we going?!" shouted Xiang Shu.

"To find your weapon!"

There were drought fiends everywhere they looked. Chen Xing raised his hand and shot a ray of light out ahead of them, clearing a path as drought fiends fled in terror from the light. The three of them charged through the city until they reached the Great Han's Exorcism Department—and found it in ruins, with resentment swirling around and black symbols covering the floor.

Chen Xing slowed down as he took in the sight before him. It looked as if the department had been razed to the ground long ago.

Xiang Shu looked up at the sky. In the time it had taken for them to get here, a drought fiend king in black armor had led a living corpse army to surround the valley, creating a watertight defensive wall. The resentment above them coiled and descended to the ground, where it revealed Shi Hai, his body now made up of swirling black flames.

"Were you looking for this?" he asked slowly, his voice hoarse. He raised his hand; the black flames from his palm parted and out came a sharp, barbed spear. One by one, on the body of the spear, bloodred symbols of the Demon God appeared.

When Shi Hai lifted his hand, the spear transformed into six additional demonic weapons: hook, halberd, piercer, chakram, and whip. They danced around one another in the sky before suddenly shooting toward Chen Xing, Xiang Shu, and Feng Qianjun.

Before he could think it through, Chen Xing erected a barrier using the Heart Lamp's power, causing the bright light around them to recede. The black spear smashed into his barrier, and as it did so, a bloody ray of light broke out, pierced the magic of the Heart Lamp—and shot straight toward Chen Xing's chest.

"Watch out!" Xiang Shu instantly reached out with the Yin Yang Mirror to block it.

Wagging its tail happily, the little dog escaped the Songbai Residence and ran out into the dark night with the Yin Yang Mirror in its mouth. From just beyond the back door, it saw that more than half of the Songbai Residence had been destroyed, and that the chaos seemed to have woken up every living being in Chang'an.

The dog hesitated a little, looking left and right. Should it return to the palace or run back into the Songbai Residence?

Just then, two men—one young, one middle-aged—approached the dog from behind. A sudden fear came over the dog, and it took a few steps away from them, still wagging its tail wildly.

“The Yin Yang Mirror?” the young man asked, taking it from the little dog. As he did so, a couple of cracks appeared on the surface of the mirror.

The middle-aged man felt his soul leave his body. “Throw it! Throw it far away!”

The young man shot him a confused look.

Bang! The spear struck the Yin Yang Mirror, shattering it. The mirror world began to collapse around them.

“You three got off easy this time,” Shi Hai said in a forbidding voice.

“No way! It broke just like that?!” Feng Qianjun exclaimed.

The world around them was breaking up. Chen Xing shouted, “The Acala Blade—”

Before he could finish, they were spat back out of the yang side of the Yin Yang Mirror.

In the span of two short hours, Chen Xing and Xiang Shu had moved from the real world to the mirror world and then back from the mirror world to the real world. Their heads spun from all the switching. Once again, when the mirror spewed them out, Xiang Shu had bumped into something and was using his body to shield Chen Xing as they bounced around. They smashed straight into the second floor of a building in the north market, shattering a room divider. Ordinary citizens near the Songbai Residence, who had been watching the commotion, heard the explosion and the ensuing racket, and turned and ran toward the source of the uproar.

Then, in the next moment, a great mass of resentment shot up into the sky. The Yin Yang Mirror had broken, causing an explosion with a radius

far greater than the one in Yique; between one breath and the next, two entire houses were razed to the ground. Black flames burst out, heralding the arrival of hundreds of thousands of drought fiends pouring into Zhuque Street.

Dawn was breaking, and the first glimmers of light were appearing overhead. The common people shrieked in terror and fled.

“Chen Xing!” Xiang Shu shouted. “Xing-er!”

Chen Xing’s head was spinning from all the bashing about, but Xiang Shu’s words sobered him right up. He made a surprised sound. “You…still remember that?”

Xiang Shu looked surprised himself, but he said, “Not now! Come over here!”

He grabbed Chen Xing’s hand and brought him to the front of the building. Chen Xing’s eyes went huge as he looked around. All of the drought fiends had been released from the Yin Yang Mirror.

“The Yin Yang Mirror broke!” Chen Xing gasped. “Everything in there that didn’t originally come from the mirror will have been released. Shit! What do we do?”

The throng of drought fiends were already running amok, hunting the people of Chang’an. They were everywhere. In a swirl of black flames, Wang Ziye flew toward the royal palace, a terrifying sneer appearing on his shadowy face.

“This is the Will of the Heavens,” Wang Ziye said in a slow, clear voice.

Chang’an descended into chaos. Everywhere they looked, people were fleeing for their lives under the dawn sky. Xiang Shu charged down to the ground floor of the building.

“Return to the palace!” said Chen Xing.

“We can’t!” Xiang Shu shouted back. “There are too many of them! We have to get out of here!”

Releasing a burst of light from the Heart Lamp had always been a successful method of dispelling a large group of drought fiends, but the Heart Lamp alone couldn’t destroy this herd of living corpses. At best, it

could drive them away, but it wouldn’t take long for them to regroup. Moreover, Chen Xing was already gasping for breath a little—it seemed that even with the spiritual qi restored to the world, the Heart Lamp could still drain him. He had to curb himself.

Xiang Shu picked up a sword that a patrolling guard had dropped. “Mana!”

Chen Xing gave the Heart Lamp a small push, and the sword in Xiang Shu’s hand immediately started glowing. Like a tiger bounding into a flock of sheep, he slashed his way through the drought fiends in the street—but then he stopped abruptly, sensing danger. Looking up, he saw several dark shadows darting toward Chen Xing.

“Look out!” Xiang Shu pulled back, and an instant later, another figure jumped down from above, this one brandishing two steel claws.

Electricity crackled from the claws as they swung through the air, creating a chain of lightning that struck a drought fiend that was charging at Chen Xing. The lightning chain’s momentum didn’t stop there either; it spread out along the main street.

“Xiao Shan?” Chen Xing yelled. “Xiao Shan. Xiao Shan!”

“Chen Xing!” Xiao Shan shouted back. He lunged at Chen Xing and grabbed him tightly, then looked at Xiang Shu. “Gege!”

A look of confusion came over Xiang Shu. “Hush!” Chen Xing whispered to him quickly. “Just go with it for now!” At a more normal volume, he asked Xiao Shan, “Why are you here?”

“I was taking a bath in Lake Barkol—”

Xiao Shan was interrupted by another series of explosions. Flames came together in a towering blaze and transformed into a dragon of fire, which charged eastward down the street with a deafening roar. And that wasn’t all—out of nowhere, a violent gust of wind surged into the sky.

“Xiaoshidi, I’m here! Ha ha ha ha!”

There was a man inside the gust of wind, his loose robes, sleeves, and belt flapping in the wind. He looked like an elegant sage reciting wind spells to manipulate the air around him. Sleeves fluttering, he rode the wind

over to them and landed atop a high wooden archway in the north of Chang'an.

Chen Xing was taken aback. "Xie-shixiong?" Since when did Xie An know magic arts?!

With an effortless wave of his hand, Xie An sent out several five-element talismans; they transformed into boulders that fell and rolled over the drought fiend horde in the street. Forming seals with both hands, he shouted, "The Revival of All Magic is upon us, and I've come to honor my promise! I'm here to help you banish yao and exterminate demons!"

As Chen Xing pressed a hand to his forehead, he noticed Xiang Shu glancing between Xie An and Xiao Shan, looking more bewildered than ever.

Deep in Weiyang Palace, military orders flowed like water. It was initially thought that the bizarre happenings in Chang'an were the actions of a group of rebels, but as reports rolled in, the situation became more and more complicated. Tuoba Yan had already brought troops out into the city to suppress the swarm of monsters, and Fu Jian, having been woken in the middle of the night, stood in the palace looking dazed. He was still trying to wrap his head around the sudden turn of events.

Princess Qinghe sprinted over to him. "Your Majesty," she said in a trembling voice, "you have to leave this place. Leave the palace with me to take refuge."

"What is happening?!" Fu Jian roared in anger. "Which family dared to rebel?!"

Shadows appeared from the ground, and Princess Qinghe's eyes grew wide. Dagger in hand, she whipped around to stand in front of Fu Jian, staring panic-stricken at the scene before her.

Shi Hai—or the mass of black flames that currently made up his body—walked slowly over to them. "Your Majesty," he said in a deep voice, "if not for all this, it would have been a few more years before we carried out our plan. You'll have to forgive me for deciding to speed things up now that the Revival of All Magic is here. With the realm's exorcists recovering their magic, I'm afraid any unnecessary delay may bring trouble."

"Wang Ziye?" Fu Jian stared at the black flames in wide-eyed disbelief. The shadows all around them were transforming into drought fiends and closing in, but Fu Jian, a true monarch, retained his composure. He only looked astonished. "What kind of yaoguai are you?"

"Perhaps I should use another body to talk to Your Majesty. You'll find that you're more accustomed to that one."

The black flames engulfed a nearby servant, who cried out in anguish as Shi Hai possessed his body. Before Fu Jian's eyes, the servant's face

melted and transformed into Wang Ziye's.

"Later," Wang Ziye continued evenly, "I'd like to make a deal with Your Majesty. Right now, however, I have a defensive formation to set up, so I'll be occupied for a while."

As he spoke, the Demon Spear appeared in his hand. Black light burst out of it and spread through the entire palace.

Feng Qianyi was inside the fallen Songbai Residence, his hair a mess, his family's ring-pommel blades resting on his knees. He turned his wheelchair and left through the back of the ruined building, departing up the mountain road that led to Mount Song.

The city was ablaze. The imperial guard had been startled awake when the chaos began, and they were now trying to use fire to herd the drought fiends into a place where they could all be destroyed at once. Resentment radiated from the royal palace, creating a black barrier around it.

Looking out at it all, Feng Qianyi let out a wild laugh. "You all finally got what was coming to you."

On the road up ahead walked Feng Qianjun, dressed in a set of martial robes. He stopped and stared at his older brother as if it pained him to look at him.

"Do you want to kill me?" Feng Qianyi asked him slowly. "It's useless, useless no matter what you do. Shi Hai-daren has already set things in motion, and it won't be long now before our lord is reborn. When he is, every Hu in the Divine Land will pay their debt in blood."

Feng Qianjun raised his hand. Spiritual qi swelled between the two of them, and the two ring-pommel blades flew toward Feng Qianjun. Feng Qianyi turned his chair sharply, his eyes filled with hatred and rage, and raised his own hand; resentment billowed out and entangled one of the blades, making it fly back toward him.

The two sabers diverged in the air and took separate paths, each flying to one brother. Feng Qianjun grabbed the Harmony Saber, and Feng Qianyi wielded the Life Saber.

“I failed to stop you once,” Feng Qianjun said, “and in all the countless nights since your death, I wished we could return to the moment where it all began. I… Dage!”

Feng Qianyi held his saber aloft. Resentment shot out from the saber and shrouded his entire body in flames of black qi. “Enough bullshit.” Feng Qianyi’s tone was somber. “You’ve chosen the path of an exorcist, so let’s fight!”

Feng Qianjun crouched and held his own saber low to the ground. “Do we have to do it this way?”

Feng Qianyi stared at Feng Qianjun from his wheelchair.

They both attacked at once.

With an enormous bang, the qi surrounding the brothers exploded, Feng Qianyi wielding resentment while Feng Qianjun used the Harmony Saber to stir up spiritual qi. These two forces of life and death collided at the peak of Mount Song. Green leaves whipped up violently all through a ten-mile radius from their clash, and vines surged from the ground to attack Feng Qianyi; then Feng Qianyi swung his saber once, and the tornado of verdant leaves turned black, withered, and fell.

The ground created a clear demarcation between them—on one side, fertile lushness, and on the other, desiccation and decay. One half of Mount Song withered while the other half flourished; the yin side was a barren black mountain, the yang side engulfed in verdant midsummer foliage. The two sides battled it out on equal ground.

“Great Chanyu!” called Tuoba Yan. He had led his troops across the city, and now, as the sun broke over the horizon, they joined up with Xiang Shu outside Zhuque Gate, at the entrance to the city.

Chen Xing, Xie An, and Xiao Shan were watching on from horseback. A great many local Hu of different tribes were gathered around Xiang Shu. The moment he’d had a chance, Xiang Shu had begun to rescue people, and as he passed through the streets, the Hu came out and followed him.

“The royal palace has been taken,” reported Tuoba Yan. “There’s some kind of black vapor outside it, and we can’t get in! His Majesty and Princess Qinghe are still inside!”

“Are the officials safe?” Xiang Shu asked quietly.

Tuoba Yan nodded. “The Murong family’s cavalry are trying to find a way into the palace!”

“What about the people of Chang’an?”

“They’ve all been evacuated!”

With Fu Jian being held captive in Taichu Palace, there was no one to issue orders—but fortunately Xiang Shu happened to be in Chang’an, so everyone was seeking him out to consult the nominal leader of all Hu. It was fortunate, too, that the palace had been Wang Ziye’s first target, and that he’d mobilized so many of the drought fiends to surround it; that had kept the harm to the civilians to a minimum, for now.

Xiang Shu laid down an order. “Tell all of the officials and soldiers in the city to retreat to Epang Palace.”

“What about His Majesty?” asked Tuoba Yan.

“Leave rescuing him to me. Chen Xing, that madman is your shixiong?”

“Yes… I guess so… I’d better go look for Feng-dage now.” Chen Xing had a strong hunch that while the rest of them were out here, Feng Qianjun was settling things with Feng Qianyi.

Xie An, who’d been standing atop a high archway, floated down to them on the air currents. “Martial God! I’ve come to lend you guys a hand!” he said to Xiang Shu. Chen Xing shot him a warning look, but it just made Xie An look puzzled. “What’s the matter, Xiaoshidi?”

Xiang Shu frowned suspiciously. When this new adult-child pair first showed up, he’d experienced a sense of déjà vu—it felt, for some reason, like he used to know them.

“It’s all right,” Chen Xing told him. “Evacuate the civilians, and I’ll go look for Feng-dage with Xie-shixiong.”

So Xiang Shu kept his questions to himself and led his troops back into the city.

Chen Xing led Xie An and Xiao Shan back to the Songbai Residence as fast as possible, all three of them galloping on horseback. “How did you two—”

“I remember everything!” said Xiao Shan. “I remember!”

“How’s Lu Ying?”

“I’ve told him everything—all of it! He told me to come help you straightaway! Don’t worry about him!”

“When it happened,” Xie An said, “I was taking a bath. My memories just came to me, all at once. No matter how much I thought about it, it didn’t seem like a dream, so I came straight to Chang’an without even asking His Majesty for forgiveness. I happened to bump into Xiao Shan-xiaoxiongdi here when I entered the city…”

“I was taking a bath too!” Xiao Shan said in bewilderment. “Why is that?”

“It has nothing to do with baths; it’s just a coincidence that everyone was taking a bath… Ah, never mind, I’ll explain later,” Chen Xing said. “We have to get Feng-dage back first.”

When Chen Xing dismounted outside Songbai Residence, the place was in ruins.

“Do you need help?” the phoenix asked from its perch on the branch of a parasol tree. Xie An, Xiao Shan, and Chen Xing had just stepped into the garden, and all three of them yelped in unison.

“A bird?” said Xiao Shan.

“A phoenix,” Chen Xing explained. “We don’t need your help just yet, but we might need it soon… Just follow us for now.”

“It seems you’ve encountered an even bigger problem,” Chong Ming said.

Xie An looked away from studying Chong Ming. “A bigger problem?” he asked Chen Xing.

Chen Xing stopped and took a deep breath. “The Acala Blade has fallen into Shi Hai’s hands.”

That was serious; Xiang Shu was the only one who didn’t realize the gravity of the situation. Now that the Acala Blade had been refined into a demonic weapon, would it still be possible to defeat Chiyou?

“Oh! I’ve been very disrespectful indeed!” Xie An said to Chong Ming. “So you are the yao king mentioned in our historical records? When I was young, I searched for the traces of the dragon and phoenix everywhere, and now they’re here! I admit, I was beginning to doubt your existence, but now that I see you here, things have finally been cleared—”

“Let’s go!” Chen Xing cut in bitterly. He ran back to tug anxiously at Xie An’s sleeves. “You do realize how urgent this is, right? This isn’t the time to try to make friends! Can you fly us up the mountain?”

“No,” Xie An said promptly. “Wind spells can only be maintained for a very short time. Longer attempts are dangerous; you might sprain your ankle falling when the magic disappears. The safest way up is to hike.”

Chen Xing was speechless.

“Feng Qianjun!” shouted Xiao Shan.

Up ahead, on the mountain, Feng Qianjun and Feng Qianyi were both giving the fight everything they had. Feng Qianyi had only just learned how to use the Life Saber, but he was on his home turf: Chang’an, abundant with resentment. Resentment from all corners of Chang’an came swirling over the ground to crash against Mount Song like ocean waves, then snaked up the mountainside and into Feng Qianyi’s body.

Meanwhile, Feng Qianjun was gathering a constant stream of spiritual qi that cascaded down from above like a waterfall and filled the sky. Mount Song was like a lone isle in a pitch-black sea. The brothers were locked in a stalemate; for the moment, neither had the upper hand.

“How did Feng Qianyi even learn how to use the Life Saber?” Chen Xing cried out in disbelief. Then he realized: Wang Ziye must have

obtained the manual for the Saber of Harmony and Life from the Yin Yang Mirror and passed it to Feng Qianyi.

The closer they got to the mountain, the stronger those opposing life-and-death forces became. They stirred up a raging storm that swept up all the stones and broken branches on Mount Song and flung them back at the mountain peak. Xie An threw out a talisman, but it was blown away by the violent winds. He threw another, and the same thing happened.

Chen Xing held onto a tree. “This place is going to be destroyed!”

Xiao Shan hooked onto the mountain wall with one of his dragon claws and grabbed Chen Xing with his other hand. “What do we do?!”

This was the destructive power of an ancient magical artifact, split in two and used to its fullest potential against itself. Chen Xing had to acknowledge that in some ways, the Silence of All Magic had been helpful.

“Can we isolate the spiritual qi?!” Xie An shouted. “This place is about to explode!”

They were nearly at the mountain’s peak now. Broken trees and branches were flying everywhere. Chen Xing glanced down at the billowing resentment gathering from all over the city. He made up his mind. “Xiao Shan!” he yelled. “Shield me!”

With that, he let go of the tree and let the wind lift him into the air. He raised his right hand and emitted a flash of light, and the tidal waves of resentment shrank away from the brilliant glare of the Heart Lamp.

Xiao Shan shouted and released a spell with the Sky-Rending Claws. Thunderbolts rained down all around them, smashing apart the rocks that hurtled toward them.

Chen Xing drew on the Heart Lamp again, and another flash erupted. There was another loud boom, and the resentment choking the peak of Mount Song cleared in an instant, revealing a small open space.

“This is our chance!” yelled Xie An.

Up on the mountaintop, the Heart Lamp had created a barrier between Feng Qianyi and the resentment he relied on for his spells; his movements ceased.

“Stop this!” Feng Qianjun turned to him, brandishing the Harmony Saber. He unleashed a thunderous force, his figure vanishing inside a wave of spiritual qi as he leaped at his older brother.

Feng Qianyi held his own saber horizontally over his knees with one hand and raised the other to cast a spell. Black vines rose from the ground, emanating deathly qi, but Feng Qianjun’s saber cut through the dried-up wood like it was nothing. Green light burst from the neat cuts he left behind.

He struck Feng Qianyi’s wrist, and the Life Saber flew out of Feng Qianyi’s hand and into the air. Feng Qianjun seized it; he had both sabers now. The force of the attack knocked Feng Qianyi out of his wheelchair. He landed on the ground and struggled there, his eyes looking up into the sky above.

In that instant, all spells were lifted. Tranquility returned to the peak of Mount Song.

Feng Qianyi let out a bitter laugh as he crawled across the ground. “You’ve won.”

“Dage,” Feng Qianjun panted, unable to catch his breath. He extended a hand toward Feng Qianyi.

“I’ve seen what I wanted…which is…to let…my lord—” Feng Qianyi let out an earsplitting roar as the last vestiges of resentment writhed through his body. Just like the first time, the resentment lifted him into the air. “The world is unjust, so I’ll die for justice—”

“Feng Qianyi!” Xie An’s voice rang out. “Stop right there!”

Xie An had been hovering in the sky, waiting for this exact moment. He flung out a talisman and gave Feng Qianyi a taste of what it felt like to be squashed under Mount Tai. Feng Qianyi screamed in anguish as he was struck back to the ground.

Chen Xing darted up to the top of the mountain and raised his hand. “Expel!”

As Feng Qianyi fell toward Chen Xing, the light of the Heart Lamp burst forth and washed all the resentment from his body. Feng Qianjun sprinted over to them and gathered his brother in his arms. “Dage!”

Resentment rose into the air. Blood dripped from the corners of Feng Qianyi's mouth; the Heart Lamp, in eradicating the resentment from his body, had left him unable to stop coughing up blood. Chen Xing went to Feng Qianjun's side and slid to the ground, pressing his hand against Feng Qianyi's heart.

The Demon God's Blood… Feng Qianyi had been the first to drink it, so by this point, that drop of blood was lodged firmly in his heart. It had integrated with the meridians in his body, transforming his frail physique.

Feng Qianjun gave Chen Xing a pleading look.

"His resistance is too strong," Chen Xing said. "I… I'll try my best. Hold him down! He's about to turn into a demon!"

Feng Qianyi's eyes widened.

"Qianyi!" Xie An said in a low voice as he walked over to them.

"Xie Anshi?" Feng Qianyi murmured.

"Talk to him!" Chen Xing urged Xie An. He remembered Che Luofeng gradually losing consciousness like this right before he died; they had to keep Feng Qianyi's mind focused.

"Feng Qianyi, do you remember what you said to me when you first left for Luoyang?" Xie An asked. When Feng Qianyi did not respond, he continued in that same quiet voice. "His Majesty ordered you to deal with things as you saw fit, but he never granted you permission to slaughter the innocent. Do you remember hearing about how during the Han dynasty, your ancestor Feng Yi saved the country by following the venerable ruler and expelling enemies? I know you see yourself and Fu Jian as enemies who cannot live under the same sky, but take a look at it from another perspective: What sins have the common people committed to deserve this?"

Xie An turned sideways, waving his sleeves. Beyond Mount Song, Chang'an had become a living hell. Hundreds of thousands of drought fiends were wreaking havoc in the city, and at all eight city gates, civilians were running for their lives.

Feng Qianyi's eyes grew wide.

“How is what you’re doing different from what the Hu did?” Xie An frowned as he looked at Feng Qianyi. “Has hatred turned you into the kind of man you despise most? Will your next step be to help Wang Ziye become the emperor and then travel south to massacre your people? His Majesty has issued a decree! If you refuse to change your ways, he will revoke your Han citizenship, and you’ll be banished from the Great Jin! You won’t need to carry out the Great Jin’s will any longer!”

Xie An’s voice rang out like the evening drum, leaving Feng Qianyi visibly rattled. More than anyone else present, Xie An represented their countless kin in the south. Feng Qianyi had always been steadfastly committed to the restoration of the Great Jin, and Xie An’s words struck home. He felt as if a rug had been pulled out from under him. If his country abandoned him, so would his life’s purpose. He would be left with nothing but an empty void.

Seizing this fleeting opportunity, Chen Xing focused everything he had on mustering the Heart Lamp’s energy and injecting it into Feng Qianyi’s heart meridian. A bright light flashed in his sea of consciousness; there was a loud blare, and then the flames of the Heart Lamp receded, revealing a sky full of smoke signals over the bloody highway of Luoyang.

Chen Xing looked around, disoriented. It had happened again! The last time this happened, he had been in Xiang Shu’s memories; while the Heart Lamp dispelled the obsessions, it had brought Chen Xing’s consciousness to the vast prairie outside Chi Le Chuan. Did that mean he was seeing Feng Qianyi’s memories this time?

“I hate… I hate…” moaned a hoarse, agonized voice.

Chen Xing was shocked by what he saw. It was a young Feng Qianyi, lying by the side of the highway, his hair in disarray. Both of his legs had been chopped off. Blood dripped from the open wounds at his cut knees, so much of it that it was pooling around him. His severed lower legs lay abandoned at one side.

As Chen Xing watched, Feng Qianyi slowly dragged himself forward, leaving a trail of blood behind him. His whole body was trembling, but his gaze was determined—he had the will to duel to the death. The sides of the highway were littered with the corpses of servants and children, and from the bottom of the road, at the other end of the paddy

field, Chen Xing heard a lady's bloodcurdling screech. It was accompanied by the raucous laughter of Qin soldiers.

Chen Xing was overwhelmed by pain and despair beyond his own imagining; they came straight from the deepest depths of Feng Qianyi's heart. Through the Heart Lamp, Chen Xing was able to feel other people's grief.

"I'll kill all of you!" Feng Qianyi screamed frantically. "I'll make sure you pay for this, even if I turn into a ghost!"

Chen Xing gasped, then rushed over, kneeled beside Feng Qianyi, and hugged him.

"Feng-lang… Feng-lang!" the lady shouted wildly. "Take care of… our children! I'm…leaving…!"

On the far side of the paddy field, the woman let out one last shout, and then her screams ceased forever. The world fell silent again.

"No matter what," Feng Qianyi ground out, "I'll make sure…they pay…"

"Qianyi, it's not time yet," Chen Xing whispered. "It's not time for you to leave yet, and it's not the end."

Feng Qianyi suddenly opened his eyes. As he did, a purplish-black monster rose from within the paddy field.

Chen Xing murmured, "I promise you that one day, the ending you await will come. It may be revenge, or departure…"

The monster roared as fresh blood gathered into its looming form, but a bright light burst around Chen Xing's body, keeping them safe from the Demon God's blood monster.

"He won't leave with you," the monster screeched hoarsely. "Wielder of the Heart Lamp, you've finally come…"

"Deity of War," Chen Xing said in a low voice.

In the real world, at the top of Mount Song, a storm was raging. With his eyes shut tight, Chen Xing knelt in front of Feng Qianjun, who held his brother in his arms. Chen Xing's body glowed softly, and most of the

resentment from Feng Qianyi's body had dissipated. All that remained was the drop of Demon God's Blood near his heart, which was disintegrating and breaking apart under the intense Heart Lamp flames Chen Xing was pouring into him.

Xie An turned around and saw that the drought fiends throughout Chang'an had sensed something. They were on the move toward Mount Song.

"How much longer?" asked Xiao Shan. "There are a lot of monsters down below!"

He and Xie An assumed offensive stances. They could see three drought fiend kings amid the sea of drought fiends, each dressed in black armor, apparently preparing to attack Mount Song.

"Let's go down and hold them off!" said Xie An.

"Hold on for a little longer!" Feng Qianjun said anxiously.

Suddenly, three figures appeared behind Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing and lunged straight at them. Feng Qianjun let out a loud shout, and in that same moment, a fourth shadowy figure swept over from the side. This newcomer spun the longsword in his hand and parried one of the attacker's weapons—*clank!*

"Sima Wei!" Feng Qianjun yelled.

Sima Wei shielded Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun and looked up at the drought fiend kings. The three drought fiend kings slowly moved apart until they were each standing in a different position on the mountain's peak, prepared to surround and kill everyone there.

Then, out of nowhere, three iron arrows soared in and knocked the drought fiend kings to the ground. The iron arrows had embedded themselves in the drought fiend kings' eyes, and blood leaked from their eyeballs as the drought fiend kings tumbled down the mountain.

Xiang Shu put his bow away. He looked down at Chen Xing and Feng Qianyi, then issued a command in the Tiele language: "Guard this place!"

At the foot of the mountain, the Hu cavalry charged in. With the help of Xie An and Xiao Shan, they formed a defensive perimeter.

Inside Feng Qianyi's memory, that drop of purple-black blood kept trying to attack, desperate to seize Feng Qianyi back from Chen Xing.

"You may take your revenge," Chen Xing whispered to Feng Qianyi, still held in his arms, "or you may not. But you must remember that revenge isn't for the ones who have passed; it's for those who are still alive…"

He raised a hand at the monster. "Now, expel!"

The Heart Lamp erupted with a flood of light that utterly overwhelmed the monster, which disintegrated under the ensuing flames. The beast let out a roar as it dissolved into ash and smoke.

In the real world, Chen Xing held Feng Qianyi and remained still—until suddenly, a halo of light burst from both of them. It swept outward, and as it went, it exorcised resentment and scattered the troop of drought fiends at the base of the mountain.

Chen Xing and Feng Qianyi both opened their eyes. Chen Xing gasped for breath, his head spinning, and Feng Qianyi fainted on the spot.

"Withdraw!" Xiang Shu shouted when he saw Chen Xing open his eyes. "Regroup at Epang Palace!"

Chapter 99

SIX HOURS LATER, inside Epang Palace, the troops and generals who had withdrawn from Chang'an were quarreling loudly enough to shake heaven itself. This change of circumstances had struck the capital very suddenly. The emperor had fallen into Wang Ziye's hands, and now Wang Ziye was holding both Fu Jian and Princess Qinghe hostage? This kind of development was simply unheard of!

Fu Rong, Murong Chui, Yao Chang, and Fu Jian's son Fu Pi were engaged in a heated argument in Epang Palace's main hall while the troops set up camp outside. The crown prince Fu Jian had appointed, his older cousin's eldest son, was not in Chang'an at the moment; everything had happened too quickly, and now all these generals and valiant warriors were assembled here without a leader, uncertain whose orders to follow.

"Where is Tuoba Yan?!" demanded a furious Murong Chui. "Why has the commander of the imperial guard turned a blind eye to all this? His Majesty was captured! Tuoba Yan must be beheaded for his negligence!"

"It was His Majesty who ordered Tuoba Yan to take the imperial guard and quash the chaos," Fu Pi pointed out. "How could he have known that Wang Ziye was a sorcerer? I told you that all Han are wicked!"

It was pandemonium inside the hall. Wang Ziye had always been Fu Jian's trusted aide; who could have ever imagined that he would incite a rebellion? Ever since the death of Wang Meng, the Qin court had looked up to Wang Ziye as its head. With Fu Jian in peril, the entire court had been plunged into chaos.

They were still quarreling when footsteps approached outside the hall.

"The Great Chanyu has arrived!" a eunuch announced.

The hall fell silent. Xiang Shu entered, drenched head to toe in blood, and as he walked in, he threw his helmet to the ground with a *clang*. Still in full armor, he walked past the people at the front of the hall, climbed up the

stairs one step at a time, and sat down on the imperial throne of Epang Palace.

Everyone blinked.

“Speak,” he ordered. “Give me a report on the situation.”

This, the people of the Qin court realized, was a critical problem. Shulü Kong had just so happened to be in Chang’an when Fu Jian was captured. This man was the Great Chanyu of the Hu; the Han were not obliged to listen to him, but it stood to reason that anyone whose ancestors had participated in the blood oath of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant had to obey him. For the time being, he could step in for Fu Jian and carry out the duties of the emperor.

“What?” Xiang Shu asked darkly. “Does anyone have any objections?”

Everyone glanced at each other. Fu Rong had a good enough grasp of Xiang Shu and Fu Jian’s relationship to know that Xiang Shu was unlikely to even think of coveting Fu Jian’s throne and title. He stepped forward. “Reporting to the Great Chanyu, the entire army has been withdrawn, and the city’s common people have been settled along the west bank of the Zao River.”

“Where’s the crown prince?” Xiang Shu asked.

Yao Chang stepped forward and bowed. “We’ve dispatched someone to Donghai to apprise him of the situation as soon as possible,” he said.

“Where’s Murong Chong?” There was no response from Murong Chui, and Xiang Shu frowned. “Murong Chui, do you not know how to speak?”

Murong Chui had no choice but to step forward. “Murong Chong is on his way. He should arrive by tomorrow evening.”

Xiang Shu caught the implication of this response, and the momentary hesitation that preceded it, though he pressed no further. These unforeseen events had occurred only last night, and it should have taken Murong Chong at least three days to get there from Pingyang. Someone must have notified him in advance, before the drought fiend chaos occurred. It wasn’t hard to guess what the Murong family had intended to do.

“Murong Chui, you and your troops will guard the four gates of Chang’an,” Xiang Shu said. “Do not let those living corpses escape.”

“Yes sir,” said Murong Chui.

“Yao Chang and Fu Rong, ready your troops and wait for my order. Once Wang Ziye has been executed, force your way through from the south, west, and north gates. Storm the imperial city from three directions at once, leaving them with a single exit. When the drought fiends have been driven away to the Zao floodplain, prepare for a decisive battle.”

“Yes sir,” the remaining people replied.

“The rest of you, find any flaming oils or catapults we have inside Epang Palace and use them to form a defensive perimeter. We shall wait for Murong Chong’s reinforcements—Are you done?”

Chen Xing had entered the hall, holding a piece of cloth covered in blood. He was so exhausted he was a little short of breath.

“Go take a break,” Xiang Shu told him.

Chen Xing waved his hand in reply. “Once I’ve finished talking, I’ll go. Everyone…” He turned toward the crowd, then hesitated and looked back at Xiang Shu. “You’re sure you want me to tell them?”

Xiang Shu frowned impatiently. “I let you talk, so spit it out.”

There was nothing else for it. Chen Xing recounted the entire series of events. The hall was dead silent as he spoke, and after he finished, he was reminded of a fairly important problem.

“Princess Qinghe, she…” Yao Chang cast an alarmed look at Murong Chui, whose face had already darkened. “This is slander! Where’s the proof?!”

“I witnessed it,” Xiang Shu said indifferently. “If you don’t believe it, wait until Qinghe has been rescued, and you can confront her face-to-face. But Jiantou must have been aware of this matter already.”

“This is—” Fu Rong broke off. This was terrible. They were practically forcing Murong Chui to rebel. This was no small matter; if he confirmed Wang Ziye’s plans, it would be tantamount to telling everyone that Princess Qinghe had participated in the conspiracy to restore the country, and the Murong family would be tarred with the same brush. Most

people at court already suspected that the Murong family intended to rebel, yes, but Murong Chui would have no *choice* but to rebel once this fact became undeniable.

Xiang Shu waved his hand at Chen Xing, beckoning him over. Chen Xing walked over to the bottom of the steps.

"Come closer," said Xiang Shu. Chen Xing blinked and climbed one step up. "To my side!" Xiang Shu snapped. "I'm not going to eat you. What are you afraid of?"

Eyebrows went up around the hall. The officials were all focused on Murong Chui's expression, unsure what he would choose. Would he draw his sword on the spot and throw it to the ground, shout "I'm rebelling!" and then rush out to start the mutiny? Or would he kneel and confess his guilt to this Great Chanyu, the current acting emperor of the dynasty? But the Great Chanyu had just changed the subject!

"Oh… Oh." Chen Xing went to Xiang Shu's side. Impatiently, Xiang Shu grabbed Chen Xing's hand and showed the officials the ring on his finger.

"With my authority as the Great Chanyu to grant clemency," Xiang Shu said, "I grant a special pardon to Princess Qinghe of the Murong clan."

All of the court officials let out simultaneous sighs of relief. In that brief moment, there was no time to wonder why a Han man was wearing the Great Chanyu's ring. Thank the heavens. They had all just been spared from internal strife.

"Furthermore, I grant a special pardon to the Feng family's Feng Qianyi," added Xiang Shu. "These two people are guilty of the crime of treason, but their crimes have been written off once and for all. Neither shall be investigated or interrogated, and no one may start a rumor about them or provoke a dispute with them. Any failure to follow this decree will be considered a violation against the Chi Le Covenant, and all Hu will jointly condemn the party responsible."

You weren't the person they were rebelling against anyway, Chen Xing thought. *When Fu Jian comes out, I think he'll die of rage over this. Ah, forget it, he deserves his bad luck.*

This way, the Feng family and Princess Qinghe were both safe; only the mastermind, Wang Ziye, would be held accountable. Everyone knew that there was no other way to resolve this. If an investigation took place, the Murong family's rebellion would be inevitable.

Chen Xing snuck a glance at Xiang Shu, who was coated in black blood and wearing dirty armor. With a glint of admiration in his eyes, he thought, *This guy looks pretty good as emperor too.*

"That's all. Leave," Xiang Shu told Chen Xing. "What else do you need to do?"

"I'm going to see Tuoba Yan," Chen Xing replied. "He's injured."

"I'll go with you." Xiang Shu rose from the emperor's throne and walked through the crowd, and they both left the hall behind.

That evening, Chen Xing was in a room attending to Tuoba Yan. Xie An, Xiao Shan, and Feng Qianjun watched closely; Xiao Shan was hugging Chen Xing's dog. On the room's other couch lay Feng Qianyi, still unconscious.

The drought fiend king had ripped open a bloody gash in Tuoba Yan's torso, from his ribs to his belly. Xiao Shan had helped apply pressure on his wound while Chen Xing stitched him up. When it was done, Chen Xing's hands were covered in blood, and he felt dizzy.

Xiang Shu watched from the sidelines. The injury itself was fortunately not too serious, but there was faint black qi coming from it. Chen Xing's hand glowed with the Heart Lamp's light as he stopped the bleeding and stitched up the wound, and under the Heart Lamp's influence, the resentment dissipated. The cut gradually faded from sinister black to a more normal dark red.

"Done." Chen Xing then had Tuoba Yan take a pill to improve blood circulation and regrow flesh. "You need a good rest. You mustn't move around too much."

Tuoba Yan was still extremely weak, his face devoid of all color. After he took the pill, he fell into a deep sleep on the bed.

Chen Xing wiped his forehead. He had checked what had seemed like an endless number of patients today. Since arriving in Epang Palace, in fact, he had been rushing around without stopping, checking up on all the officers, soldiers, and ordinary citizens who had gotten injured because they were bitten by the drought fiends. It was lucky that after the drought fiends had been released from the Yin Yang Mirror, they'd swarmed the imperial palace instead of indiscriminately attacking civilians like last time.

As soon as the people of Chang'an saw the monsters, they ran away, and the army had also retreated immediately. That left Tuoba Yan and his imperial guards. Tuoba Yan had charged recklessly back to the imperial palace to attack it and rescue Fu Jian, which was how he'd been injured so badly. Other people, like the members of the Murong clan, had withdrawn as soon as they could—in fact, the Murong clan had fled faster than anyone else. Even Fu Jian's cousin Fu Rong ran away to save his own hide.

"Still so stubborn," Chen Xing said, feeling helpless. "Sometimes Tuoba Yan acts like such a fool."

"How many people have you treated?" Xie An asked him. "Xiaoshidi, you should get some rest too."

Chen Xing was, in fact, exhausted. The Revival of All Magic had supplied plentiful spiritual qi for the Heart Lamp, but the Heart Lamp also used more of his mental constitution than before. "Yes, I should rest for a moment," he admitted, wiping away his sweat and sitting on the edge of the couch. "I'm tired. Exhausted, honestly."

He patted the dog, leaned against Xiang Shu, and somehow dropped right off to sleep.

Xiang Shu blinked. Everyone else stared. They all just sat in the room, looking at each other.

"Um…let me introduce you," said Feng Qianjun, who had just finished tending to his brother. "This little guy is Xiao Shan, an old friend who is also here to exorcise demons."

Xiao Shan cocked his head. Feng Qianjun kept giving him meaningful glances, but Xiao Shan, not understanding, threw a questioning look at Xie An. When he looked back, Feng Qianjun had progressed to forceful, exaggerated winks. Xiao Shan didn't really get it, but he nodded.

Xie An, by contrast, had already grasped that Xiang Shu didn't remember anything of the past. He nodded and said, "My name is Xie Anshi."

Xiang Shu's expression suggested that he was experiencing some déjà vu, but he couldn't seem to remember where he had seen them before. "All of you, get out and let him rest for a bit."

But wait—that wasn't right either. Tuoba Yan and Feng Qianyi were also in the room, and they weren't going anywhere. Realizing that, Xiang Shu lifted Chen Xing into his arms and left to find somewhere for Chen Xing to sleep.

With Xiang Shu gone, Feng Qianjun, Xie An, and Xiao Shan started to exchange information.

"I'm still afraid that this is all just a dream," said Feng Qianjun. "I don't really believe that it is, but…I've heard that before people die, anything they've left unsettled during their life replays in front of them like scenes from a play. And whether it's you or Xiao Shan, Fu Jian, my dage, or Tuoba Yan, I have seen you all before."

"I had that thought too," said Xie An. "But have you realized something? There is one thing that proves we're not dreaming of past events—that we really have gone back to three years ago."

Xiao Shan made a confused noise.

Xie An gave them both a cunning smile. "Have you seen that phoenix's human form? As a yao king, it must have a human form, right? And even if it doesn't… You've seen the phoenix, right? Do you know what a phoenix looks like? The phoenix we saw, is that how you imagined a phoenix to look?"

Feng Qianjun realized he was right. If all of this had just been his life flashing before his eyes in the moment before his death, he would only have seen a repetition of past events from his life. The flashbacks would only have included people from his memory, though their appearances might have been blurred with age. But they had never seen the phoenix before time turned back.

"I've seen his human form!" Finally, Feng Qianjun could be certain that this wasn't an illusion.

Xie An nodded. “This time, Wang Ziye got to the Acala Blade before us, which complicates things. We have to figure out how to get it back and return it to the Martial God’s hands so we can solve that final problem facing us in the battle at the Fei River.”

Feng Qianjun had heard from Chen Xing about the altar on the battlefield. “Xiang-xiongdi is the only one who knows where the entrance to Huanmo Palace is,” he said. “I can’t believe he, of all people, went and forgot everything.”

“That is no issue. I made arrangements before I came here and sent my people to the Fei River to dig up the ground for several miles around the site of the battle. It may take two or three years of digging, but eventually, we’ll find it.”

Feng Qianjun nodded, awed by this brute-force strategy.

Xiao Shan spoke up at last. “When we go back to save Lu Ying,” he said, “Lu Ying said he might have some ideas that he can tell Chen Xing.”

The courtyard was as pretty as a painting. It was summer, and the courtyard was all verdant greens, with wind chimes tinkling softly in the breeze. Compared to Chang’an, where resentment filled the air, this was paradise on earth.

Chen Xing slept through the sky growing dark and then brightening again. Finally, he rose from his side of the bed, yawning.

“I thought you’d never wake up,” Xiang Shu said from the outer room. Dressed only in his underclothes, he sat playing the qin and facing the courtyard, bathed in brilliant sunlight and surrounded by scenery straight out of a painting.

Chen Xing jolted. “How long have I been asleep? Where are we?” he asked anxiously. It couldn’t have been three whole months again, could it? Had things spiraled out of control again? Had Chang’an fallen? Were they already in Jiangnan?!

“One night,” replied Xiang Shu. “We’re still in Epang Palace. Feng Qianyi and the dog have been sent away already, so that Jiantou can’t try to settle any grudges when he returns.”

Chen Xing sagged in relief. The shock had almost sent him right back into unconsciousness. *Thank heaven*, he thought, *I was just tired.*

"You saved more than a thousand people?" Xiang Shu asked in disbelief.

On the day everything had happened, as they withdrew to Epang Palace, Chen Xing saw that many civilians and imperial guards had sustained scratches or bites from the drought fiends. He had stayed behind to dispel the resentment in their wounds—and apparently treated some thousand people in the process. He was elated to find that with the abundance of spiritual qi from the Revival of All Magic, the Heart Lamp could cleanse those wounds; now they didn't have to fear any corpses transforming into more drought fiends.

"Now what?" Chen Xing asked, feeling lost. "What do we do now?"

They were interrupted by the arrival of several guards. "Great Chanyu, your armor."

Xiang Shu set aside the qin and got up. "Your shixiong volunteered to go back to Chang'an to oppose Wang Ziye," he told Chen Xing. "And Feng Qianjun wanted to rescue Princess Qinghe."

"This situation is much more serious than they realize," Chen Xing said. "We have to discuss it first."

Wang Ziye was occupying the imperial palace and holding both Fu Jian and Princess Qinghe hostage. Xiang Shu had a hundred thousand soldiers surrounding Chang'an, but in truth, he was at his wits' end. His first priority was rescuing the hostages; after that, Fu Jian could deal with the rest himself, however he liked.

Looking at Chen Xing now, though, Xiang Shu suddenly seemed to lose his words.

"What?" Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu frowned doubtfully, as if he was thinking hard about something, then shook his head. "It's nothing."

Chen Xing wondered if Xiang Shu had just remembered something. He'd seen that look on Xiang Shu's face several times since they'd met

again in the dungeon in Xiangyang—it was the look of someone who was immersed in memories.

After he changed his clothes, Chen Xing followed Xiang Shu to a high point on Epang Palace, where they met Feng Qianjun and Xie An. Together, they looked toward Chang'an and saw that Taichu Palace, off in the distance, was covered by dense black clouds.

"This won't be easy," Chen Xing said, frowning. "That's a defensive formation set up with the Acala Blade."

This style of defensive formation had also been called a "boundary" in the past, because it relied on the power of the magical artifact itself. Wang Ziye was using it for two purposes: to confine the abundant resentment inside the palace, and to keep the mortals outside from coming in.

The phoenix flew in and perched on the rooftop. "Do you need help?"

"Who's speaking?" asked Xiang Shu.

"Not yet," Chen Xing said. He had an idea for his last wish, so he wasn't about to use it up just yet. To Xiang Shu, he explained, "This is a… well, a yao king."

"Could you please transform into your human form so I can take a look?" Xie An asked politely.

"You'll have to get Chen Xing to ask for that," the phoenix said. "I'll agree to whatever he says."

Xiang Shu frowned. He scrutinized the phoenix, a dangerous expression on his face.

"It's not what you think," Chen Xing said quickly. "Forget it. I'll explain it to you later."

Tuoba Yan came over, though walking seemed to cause him great difficulty and he kept one hand pressed to his wound. Feng Qianjun quickly lent a hand to support him. "I've tried getting through the barrier," Tuoba Yan reported. "It's extremely dangerous inside that black wall, and there are monsters guarding it."

“Hmm…” Chen Xing frowned, his mind racing as he thought about how to undo the defensive formation. They had to get rid of Wang Ziye today, no matter the cost. They had tolerated his continued existence for far too long.

“Theoretically,” Xie An mused, “if we assault this defensive wall until the resentment inside is all spent, it should disintegrate on its own.”

“It’s not that easy. Zhang Liu once used the Acala Blade to set up the boundary inside the Yin Yang Mirror, and Shi Hai spent a hundred years trying to break it and failed.”

Xiang Shu looked up. There was another name that sounded oddly familiar. “What is the Acala Blade?”

“A sword that’s supposed to belong to you, but now Wang Ziye has his hands on it,” Chen Xing told him.

“How did you all get in last time?” asked Xie An.

During their original confrontation with Feng Qianyi, there had been no defensive formation around Taichu Palace, and Chen Xing had gotten into and out of the palace with the help of the Yin Yang Mirror. Now, they didn’t even have the mirror; it had been destroyed. The whole situation was one big headache.

“Is there any way,” Chen Xing wondered aloud, “to cheat our way past the defensive wall so that we can get inside to take Fu Jian and Princess Qinghe back? How did Wang Ziye trick the Acala Blade into letting him pick it up? There must be a way… Oh! There is! Where’s Sima Wei? Get Sima Wei here, quickly!”

That evening, they gathered again on Mount Song and set off stealthily toward Taichu Palace.

Xie An sighed in admiration. “Xiaoshidi is so clever.”

Chen Xing shushed him nervously. His eyes were fixed on the dark silhouette approaching Taichu Palace at the end of Chang’an’s main street. “I’m still not sure if this will work.”

“When the defensive formation comes down,” Xiang Shu said, “Chen Xing and I will be in charge of dealing with Kjera while you all handle the

drought fiend army."

Chen Xing nodded. He looked up at Xiang Shu, who patted the back of his hand in response. Ready, then. Chen Xing took Xiang Shu's left hand in his right and activated the Heart Lamp. He channeled the Heart Lamp's power through his own glowing hand into Xiang Shu's body until Xiang Shu's heart meridian shone brilliantly.

"Make sure you get a hold of Wang Ziye's spear before anything else," Chen Xing reminded him for the umpteenth time. "The most important thing is to reclaim your divine weapon."

Xiang Shu nodded.

With Feng Qianjun's Sabers of Harmony and Life strapped to his back, Sima Wei walked along the road toward the defensive formation. The road was thronged with drought fiends, but he passed through with no resistance and strode straight for the depths of Taichu Palace.

A spear of solid black stood at the center of Taichu Palace's pavilion, bloodred sigils flickering along its body. Resentment billowed around it, rippling outward like ocean waves to create an impenetrable defensive formation.

Wang Ziye and Fu Jian stood in front of the platform, Fu Jian surveying the countless living dead crammed inside the palace.

"The dead shall never meet their demise in the mortal realm," Wang Ziye told him. "Look, Your Majesty. Before their deaths, these officers and soldiers were yours to command; now, they'll fight for you even in death."

The five drought fiend kings gathered around the platform. Wang Ziye approached them, removed the helmet from one of the drought fiend kings, and gestured for Fu Jian to take a look.

"What does Your Majesty think? Dead or alive—what's the difference?"

"What touching yet insincere words, Wang Ziye," Fu Jian said icily. "You're merely trying to tempt Us into drinking your poison so that We, too, will become a living corpse for you to control!"

Wang Ziye smiled. “Your Majesty, look at me, then at them. I’ve wandered freely in this world for several thousand years. Do you think I am controlled by anyone?”

Fu Jian fell silent.

“If a living person is forced to drink the Demon God’s Blood, then, correct, they will become a muddleheaded walking corpse with no consciousness of their own. But if you are willing to dedicate your life to my lord, he will help you attain eternal life—one as free and unfettered as mine. In any case, your life is in my hands right now.” Wang Ziye smiled coldly. “Why would I waste my breath on nonsense?”

Off to the side, Princess Qinghe stared at Wang Ziye.

“You need only nod, and my lord will give you an army so immense it will never run out and a body that will never die.”

Chapter 100

"AND BY THEN," Fu Jian said, "We will be nothing but your puppet, living helplessly under your control!"

Wang Ziye laughed heartily. "Oh, Fu Jian. Even now you're trying to fathom the intentions of a god with the mind of a mortal. My lord is an ancient demon god and the ruler of the mortal world; to him, humans are nothing more than ants. What does he care about ruling a colony of ants?"

This struck Fu Jian dumb.

"My lord has no interest in your eternal empire. Once he has achieved his goal, he will return the empire to you, and you may reign over the Divine Land as a wise ruler for generations to come."

Fu Jian frowned. "What exactly does he want?"

"He wants you to create resentment for him, and to help him obtain a certain artifact—a ring, a remnant of the shattered Dinghai Pearl. Once he has that, my lord will leave the present world to fulfill a desire he has harbored for thousands of years: returning to the past to seek revenge for his humiliation. When he's no longer in this era, what need will he have to control you?"

Wang Ziye raised his hand and summoned a small cup. It flew over to land in Fu Jian's hand, and Fu Jian gripped it tightly.

"Then I will open the defensive formation," Wang Ziye said authoritatively. "You can still call back your troops and prepare for the southern conquest."

"What if We refuse?" Fu Jian asked in a voice like flint.

"Then," said Wang Ziye, with a hint of regret, "I'll have no choice but to refine you into a new drought fiend king. Once you've lost your senses, your subordinates will scatter, and they'll follow the Great Chanyu, Shulü Kong…"

These words struck a sore spot. A faint trace of anger surfaced on Fu Jian's face.

“You are aware of the situation you’re in,” Wang Ziye said smilingly. “From the very first day I came to your side, I warned you, Your Majesty. The seemingly ironclad Qin empire is actually a collection of factions, each with its own schemes. That woman behind you is the perfect example, isn’t she?”

Fu Jian’s fingers trembled slightly around the cup in his hand.

Meanwhile, Sima Wei was approaching the base of the platform. He unfastened the twin blades from his back, and drove them into the cracks between the bricks. Then he plastered talismans over the area, sealing it temporarily.

Outside, Chen Xing was waiting, glancing at the sky and holding his breath.

In the next moment, Sima Wei leaped onto the platform, vaulted over a wooden pillar, and cast a grappling hook, its rope coiling tightly around Princess Qinghe’s waist. When Fu Jian spun to look at her, he saw a look of shock on her face. Before she could react, the hook yanked her from the platform and dragged her down.

For a moment, Wang Ziye was stunned. Then, snapping back to his senses, he shouted, “Who’s there?!”

All five drought fiend kings bowed in unison and sprang into action, lunging toward the falling Princess Qinghe. Princess Qinghe’s voice rang out in a desperate cry.

“Now!” Chen Xing commanded. Summoning the power of the Heart Lamp, he smacked one hand against Feng Qianjun’s back, and Feng Qianjun focused all his attention on activating the Sabers of Harmony and Life.

A thousand paces away, the sabers flared with black fire. They instantly shifted form and began devouring the resentment trapped within the defensive formation with wild abandon. A fierce glint flashed in Feng Qianjun’s eyes, his pupils burning red, and he let out a furious roar. “Rise!”

Chen Xing used the Heart Lamp to protect Feng Qianjun’s heart meridian. The Sabers of Harmony and Life surged to life; from beneath the platform, a massive jet-black tree shot skyward, its force blasting apart Taichu Palace’s towers and sending them toppling to the ground. Suddenly,

the Demon Spear hurtled through the air in a sweeping arc of black smoke, heading straight for the northeast corner.

The spear fell, the barrier shattered, and the black wall vanished with a deep hum. The Qin generals, who had been waiting for this moment, charged into battle with their troops.

“Go!” shouted Chen Xing.

At his command, everyone leaped over the palace walls, throwing themselves into the tide of hundreds of thousands of rampaging drought fiend soldiers. A radiant light tore through the murky waves of resentment. Sensing trouble, Wang Ziye soared into the air and extended a hand. The Demon Spear responded, streaking skyward.

Xiao Shan flexed his claws. Down came a storm of lightning to split the rain-drenched battlefield, clearing a path through the undead. Xie An flicked both hands and sent talismans soaring like birds in flight, each trailing flames that set the drought fiends below ablaze.

Leading the imperial guard, Tuoba Yan charged into the palace. “Rescue His Majesty!” he bellowed.

Sima Wei jumped down from the platform, carrying Princess Qinghe. Feng Qianjun rushed to meet him, shouting, “Leave it to me!”

As he summoned the Sabers of Harmony and Life, the crimson glow in his eyes faded and his breath steadied. With the barrier broken, resentment began flooding through Chang’an, and the drought fiends, now uncontrolled, swarmed outward in a frenzied assault.

“Go,” Chen Xing said. “Xiang Shu, take it back!”

He lit up the Heart Lamp. Up ahead, a brilliant light burst from Xiang Shu’s body, transforming him into a golden-armored God of War. His majestic golden-white robe swirling, he took a step into the air, and humming golden characters appeared beneath his boots.

Xiang Shu stepped across the characters and soared into the sky. When he turned, another golden character appeared. Several other characters shattered in midair; their pieces came together to form a golden dragon made of light, and the dragon carried him upward. When he reached Wang Ziye, Xiang Shu’s long hair retracted into short, flying strands, and

his armor—the chest plate, war skirt, war boots, and armguards—shone with radiant light, as if a new blazing sun had appeared in the sky.

Wang Ziye sneered. Xiang Shu, confronting an armed opponent without any weapons, circled his hands. With his left palm, he slashed horizontally toward Wang Ziye's face, and he reached out to grasp the Demon Spear with his right hand.

"You're too late," Wang Ziye said. The Demon Spear released a torrent of black flames that spiraled back and engulfed Xiang Shu whole.

Down below, Chen Xing gasped and tried to activate the Heart Lamp again. The spear began to shake violently, and Xiang Shu cried out furiously, his hand instantly drenched in blood. Wang Ziye grabbed the Demon Spear and spun in midair, sending Xiang Shu plummeting perilously toward the earth.

Chen Xing's eyes went wide in alarm—but Xiang Shu released his grip on the Demon Spear, flipped in midair so that his feet were facing down, and bent his knees as he slammed both feet into the ground with a loud thud.

"I can't get it!" Xiang Shu shouted. Chen Xing was at a loss for what to do, but Xiang Shu wasn't done. "Give me mana!" he told Chen Xing. "Don't get distracted! I'll try again!"

Wang Ziye turned, Demon Spear in hand, and laid eyes on Chen Xing. Realizing that this was his true target, he dove at Chen Xing without hesitation.

Xiang Shu bent down and shot forward like an arrow, reaching Wang Ziye in an instant. He slammed his foot into Wang Ziye's spine, knocking him face-first to the ground with an impressive thump. Next, he flipped and landed in front of Chen Xing, his bare hands raised in a fighting stance. Light surged from his body and formed a protective aura around Chen Xing.

So cool! He's so cool! Chen Xing thought. *Wow, my Martial God! How is he so…so Martial-Godly?!*

Xiang Shu turned around anxiously. "What do we do now?!"

“I-I-I…I don’t know either…” Chen Xing stammered. “Ah! What do we do?!”

Xiang Shu was utterly exasperated with him. “Where’s Kjera?!”

Shi Hai’s host had been crushed by a single kick from Xiang Shu. Now without a vessel, his soul soared into the air. He waved one ethereal hand, and the Demon Spear flew toward him and landed firmly in his grasp.

The situation was now clear: Neither side could overpower the other. Chen Xing’s mind raced. Not wishing to continue the battle with Xiang Shu, Shi Hai gripped the Demon Spear in both hands and said in a low voice, “Come then, let’s see what you’re capable of, in the face of my army…”

In the next instant, resentment exploded, and the entire drought fiend army gathered again under the command of the five drought fiend kings. They turned to face Xiang Shu and Chen Xing, preparing to charge.

Xiang Shu couldn’t risk pursuing Wang Ziye any further. He took a deep breath and stood before Chen Xing. “A hundred thousand,” he said in a deep voice. “Do you think I can break through them?”

“That depends on you,” said Chen Xing.

Overhead, Wang Ziye made a hand gesture. Chen Xing quickly wrapped his arms around Xiang Shu from behind.

The army surged toward them like a waterfall. Xiang Shu leaned forward slightly, and amid the riptide of drought fiends, Chen Xing pushed the Heart Lamp to its limits. A blinding light surrounded them and blasted outward, a shock wave that toppled the advancing army.

Chen Xing’s vision blurred. Xiang Shu turned his head, and the Heart Lamp’s energy surged within him and produced another dragon of light. It spiraled around them and breathed fire in all directions, scorching countless drought fiends in front of Taichu Palace.

Shi Hai couldn’t believe what he was seeing. As he searched for an opportunity to attack them, aiming to pierce their hearts with the Demon Spear, a voice suddenly came from behind him.

“We meet again. Have you been well?”

It was Xie An, who had somehow joined forces with Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun and reached the top of Taichu Palace. All three of them struck in unison, sending Shi Hai crashing to the ground.

Clutching the Demon Spear, Shi Hai fell like a fiery black meteor. The resulting explosion of resentment shattered the palace walls, and the drought fiend soldiers, losing their orders, were thrown into chaos.

“Shulü Kong!” Fu Jian thundered.

Xiang Shu gathered his bright flames and retreated, pulling Chen Xing along with him by the wrist.

Under Tuoba Yan’s protection, Fu Jian hurried over to them. “Catch Wang Ziye for Us!”

“We don’t know where he ran off to!” Chen Xing shouted back.

Xie An and Xiao Shan quickly joined them, and Feng Qianjun, who had Princess Qinghe by the wrist, rushed over to reunite with the rest of them.

“If we can’t get a hold of the weapon, can we destroy it instead?” Xiang Shu asked.

“No, no, no,” said Chen Xing. “Let me think. There must be a way.”

“There’s no time!” Xiang Shu grabbed him. “It’s just like the Yin Yang Mirror—when two magical artifacts collide, they shatter! Think of a way to destroy it!”

Resentment swirled nearby, and Shi Hai materialized atop Taichu Palace. “Your Majesty,” he said in a low voice, “have you made your choice? Or should I leave Chang’an to you and let you take some time to think it over?”

Xiang Shu looked quickly at Fu Jian, who, unexpectedly, seemed to avoid his gaze. Fu Jian said, “Tuoba Yan! Move the court to Epang Palace! Forget this place for now!”

“No,” said Xiang Shu. “If all of these drought fiends escape from Chang’an and scatter across the Central Plains, who will take responsibility?”

“Let them go south—there will be plenty of people to deal with them there!”

Shi Hai shook the Demon Spear in his hand. Receiving the order, the five drought fiend kings simultaneously moved to round up the vast drought fiend army, intending to break through the city and march south.

It was then that Chen Xing suddenly remembered something. “Shi Hai!” he yelled, and Shi Hai turned his head. “Have you seen this?”

He raised the White Tiger Banner.

Spiritual qi poured into the White Tiger Banner. The banner flashed with light, and a phantom white tiger appeared overhead. As it soared over the drought fiend army, more than two hundred thousand drought fiends broke free from Shi Hai’s control, abandoned the drought fiend kings, and ran toward the city’s western gate.

“My drought fiends!” shouted Shi Hai.

“Go!” Chen Xing ordered.

Xiang Shu mounted his horse, pulling Chen Xing onto the saddle in front of him. With Chen Xing holding the White Tiger Banner, Xiang Shu spurred the horse and charged out through Chang’an’s western gate.

Shi Hai was furious. He flew through the sky, Demon Spear still in hand, chasing after his army.

“Your drought fiends!” Xie An laughed uproariously, careless of the glare Shi Hai shot at him.

Under the influence of the White Tiger Banner, the drought fiends flooded off the official road and followed the path Xiang Shu had planned, toward Epang Palace. It was a sight to behold. Behind them, the five drought fiend kings followed, and further back, Shi Hai flew in pursuit, like a group of shepherds shouting and chasing their startled flock of sheep.

They weren’t the only ones chasing the drought fiend army, either—Murong Chui and his subordinates were in hot pursuit, preparing to surround them.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Fu Jian bellowed. “Listen to me!”

Xiang Shu turned his head. “You’ll understand when you get there!”

“Don’t just stand there! Get rid of as many as you can!” shouted Chen Xing, holding the White Tiger Banner aloft.

Xie An, Feng Qianjun, and Xiao Shan spurred their horses and caught up to Xiang Shu and Chen Xing. Each released their spells.

“Control the horse!” Feng Qianjun told Princess Qinghe.

Princess Qinghe shook the reins. “Yah!”

Intermittent bursts of lightning from the group sent sand and stones flying. Princess Qinghe and Feng Qianjun circled around in a large perimeter.

Xiang Shu and Chen Xing led the drought fiend army to Epang Palace. The Qin army, which had been lying in wait by the bank of the Zao river, launched flaming oil at the drought fiends with their catapults.

Feng Qianjun unleashed the Sabers of Harmony and Life, cutting through the periphery and then pulling back with a swift motion. Thorns nearly ten feet in length erupted from the earth to create a barricade that blocked the drought fiends’ path.

Chen Xing stowed the White Tiger Banner and shook the Zouyu Banner, the artifact that quelled battles, and the drought fiends scattered.

“The Governor of Pingyang has arrived!”

“Murong Chong is here!”

Thousands of troops charged over the horizon as Murong Chong led the Pingyang Silver Cavalry into battle.

“It’s always such a grand affair whenever he shows up,” Chen Xing muttered.

Fu Jian reached the barricade around the drought fiends and saw flames licking the air. Inside the barricade was a sea of fire; once again, Xiang Shu and Chen Xing had handily destroyed the hundreds of thousands of drought fiends. Murong Chong joined the fray.

Shi Hai had chased them all the way to the front of Epang Palace just to see the drought fiend army, which he had gone to such lengths to put

together, burned to ashes. Only the five drought fiend kings remained, and, realizing they were no match for Chen Xing, they abandoned their pursuit.

Chen Xing looked up into the sky, where he saw Shi Hai transform into a meteor and fly off northwest, trailing black flames. The five drought fiend kings rose from the ground and followed him.

“Fenghuang-er!” shouted Fu Jian.

Murong Chong and his army waited on the outskirts of the battlefield.

It was as if some grand ritual were taking place in front of Epang Palace. Flames soared into the sky, rolling up in a fiery storm, while soldiers and civilians watched from a distance, lining both banks of the Zao river.

“Kjera escaped,” Xiang Shu told Chen Xing, who was still sitting in front of him on the horse. “We didn’t get the sword you wanted.”

“It’s okay. How’s your hand?”

Chen Xing turned to look anxiously at Xiang Shu’s palm, but Xiang Shu just shrugged; his hand showed no sign of injury. When he transformed into the Martial God, any wounds he had healed almost instantly.

“We need to come up with a new plan,” Chen Xing said apprehensively. “It recognized a new master. I can’t believe it recognized *Shi Hai* as its master!”

Nearby, Fu Jian’s face and body were blackened with soot. He exhaled in frustration as his generals approached.

“Your Majesty!” one general said. “Your humble general apologizes for being late to your rescue!”

“Your Majesty!” cried another.

“Enough!” Fu Jian yelled in irritation. “Shulü Kong!”

Xiang Shu, who had been speaking quietly to Chen Xing, turned his gaze on Fu Jian.

“If you have a way to command the drought fiends, then there was no need to kill them. Why didn’t you follow Our orders?!” Fu Jian demanded.

Foreboding pricked Chen Xing’s senses. Shi Hai, he recalled, had told Fu Jian to “take some time to think it over.” Did that mean Wang Ziye

had convinced Fu Jian? How had Wang Ziye gotten Fu Jian to comply last time?

"Orders?" Xiang Shu raised an eyebrow. "Your orders to whom? Are you speaking to me?"

Fu Jian froze, staring at Xiang Shu. That was when Murong Chong and his soldiers arrived, and positioned themselves behind Xiang Shu. The Hu cavalry assembled, and suddenly, two distinct armies stood in front of Epang Palace.

Fu Rong stepped forward and whispered a few words to Fu Jian. Behind them, the wildfires on the plain gradually burned out, leaving behind a cloud of ashes that darkened the sky and swirled in the air around Fu Jian and Xiang Shu.

Suddenly, Xiang Shu called over to one of the Hu men. "Has Feng Qianyi been sent off?"

"Yes, Great Chanyu, he has been sent on his way," the man replied.

Xiang Shu, Chen Xing thought admiringly, *is brilliant.*

After hearing Fu Rong's report, Fu Jian said a few furious words and turned to leave.

"Take Princess Qinghe away," Fu Rong ordered. "Great Chanyu, please return to Epang Palace! His Majesty has other matters to discuss."

"Fu Jian!" Feng Qianjun shouted, loud and sudden. "When Qinghe was thirteen, with no country and no family, you abducted her and brought her to your palace. The humiliation she endured was beyond words. She considered killing you, but you had her people as hostages, and she dared not risk their lives. In fact, Wang Ziye has urged her to murder you on several occasions, but she has never agreed. She doesn't love you, but she has never harmed you! Just let bygones be bygones!"

"Qianjun…" Princess Qinghe's voice trembled.

"The Great Chanyu has pardoned Princess Qinghe and my brother, Feng Qianyi, for their crimes," Feng Qianjun continued. "If Your Majesty has no further orders, then let them go!"

Murong Chong's expression changed. He looked over at Murong Chui, who made a barely noticeable gesture.

Fu Jian halted his horse. For a moment, everyone looked at his back. Then he turned back around. “Shulü Kong, why don’t you be the emperor?”

“Forget it,” Xiang Shu replied. “Not interested.”

Fu Jian erupted in fury. “Tuoba Yan, Murong Chui! Seize them all!”

Havoc broke out among the Hu soldiers assembled behind Xiang Shu. It came as no surprise to Chen Xing and Xie An; given the relationship between the Ancient Chi Le Covenant and the Qin court, this day was always inevitable.

“Who dares to move against the Great Chanyu?!” shouted Murong Chong.

“Fenghuang-er?” Fu Jian said quietly.

“Your Majesty,” replied Murong Chong, “if you’re truly set on killing my sister, I will fight you to the end!”

The two sides stood in deadlock. Then Xiang Shu spoke again: “Do as you wish, Fu Jian. Farewell.”

He whistled, and the Pingyang army split in two. With Chen Xing at his side, Xiang Shu led the charge, cutting through the ranks—a single rider against thousands. Xie An and the other exorcists followed close behind, then the mixed Hu forces, and finally Murong Chong. The entire group moved forward in a grand procession, leaving the plains of the Zao river behind.

Resentment faded. The sky was as clear as could be, streaming boundless sunshine onto the vibrant greens of summer that lined the northern road out of Chang’an.

Some of the Hu carriages were waiting by the roadside, and it was here that Feng Qianyi had been taken after he was removed from Epang Palace.

Chen Xing looked back at all the people behind them: the Sixteen Hu tribes, Xie An, Xiao Shan, Feng Qianjun, Princess Qinghe, and Murong Chong and the Pingyang army, stretching out into the distance in what seemed an endless line, heading inexorably north. When he turned back, his breath intermingled with Xiang Shu’s, and Xiang Shu glanced down at him.

Chen Xing watched as Feng Qianjun stuffed Sima Wei into a carriage to hide him along with Feng Qianyi. Once he'd checked on his brother's condition, he got back on his horse, and Chen Xing smiled at him. "Seems like there are more people than last time!"

Feng Qianjun chuckled. "Yeah, you're right!"

"Are we going back to Chi Le Chuan now?" asked Xiao Shan.

Xiang Shu raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You're from Chi Le Chuan too?"

Xiao Shan glanced at Xiang Shu, then at Chen Xing, but didn't say anything.

"We're not singing today?" said Chen Xing.

"Singing what?" Xiang Shu asked, baffled.

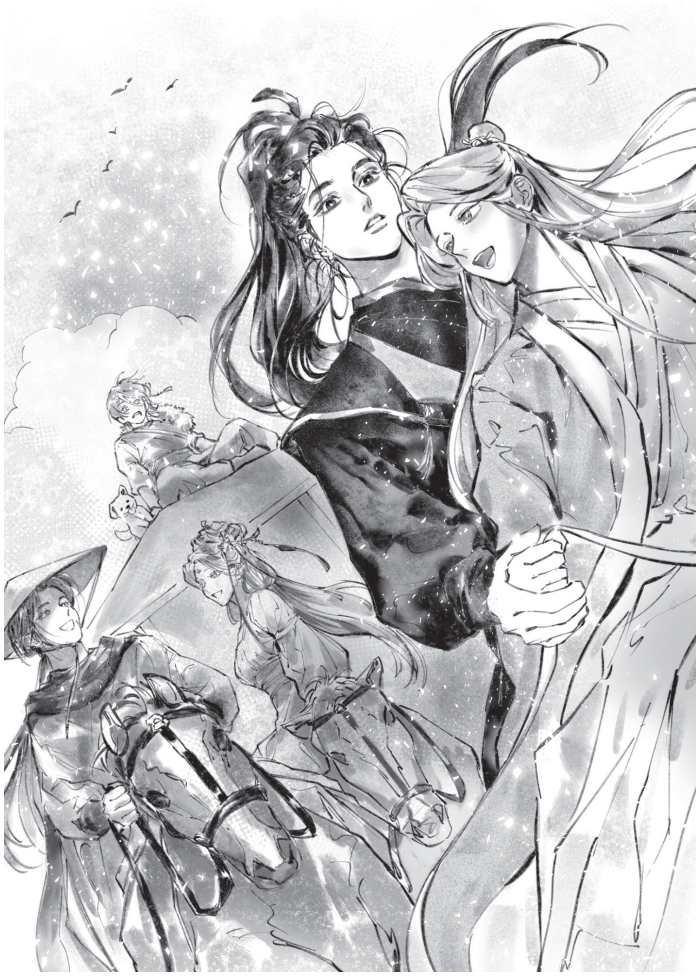
Chen Xing laughed. "Chi Le Chuan…"

"Under the Yin Mountains," Xiao Shan sang, picking up the thread.

They spurred their horses, each faster than the last. Feng Qianjun led the way, catching up to Princess Qinghe as she sang in a melodious voice, "The sky resembles an arched hut, covering the plain whole."

Xiang Shu joined in. "The vast and blue sky, the boundless wilderness…"

Behind them, a migration of tens of thousands of people followed. "When the winds blow, the grass bends low, as cattle and sheep will show."



A phoenix spread its wings and soared overhead, flying over the front of the convoy.

The Great Wall stood tall at the end of the sky, having endured thousands of years of wind and rain, unchanging. It was the enclosure of the heavens, the walls of the earth; ancient, vast winds blew from beyond it, sweeping the fresh scent of the grasslands into the pass. Beyond the ancient, immense gray wall stretched a vast mountain range; like a divine dragon, its expanse was endless. Sparkling lakes shimmered like the sea, and here and there sheep stood, scattered like pearls on the grassy blanket of the plains. The sky was a vast dome over the wilderness, and beneath it, the grass underfoot gleamed with a bright light.

Just like that, Chen Xing’s party had grown to encompass one protector, one phoenix, one human, one child, one dog, one drought fiend, and Xie An, all heading toward Chi Le Chuan.

Onward!

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Dinghai Fusheng Records

VOLUME 5

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

Characters

CHEN XING 陈星: The last exorcist, tasked by his shifu with a quest to restore magic to the world before catastrophe strikes. He has uncommonly good luck, but it will run out when he is twenty years old.

XIANG SHU 项述: Also known as Shulü Kong (述律空), once the Great Chanyu of the Hu people. Xiang Shu is the man Chen Xing's Heart Lamp has designated his Protector Martial God.

Great Jin

FENG QIANJUN 冯千钧: A skilled swordsman who accompanies Chen Xing and Xiang Shu.

XIE AN 謝安: A Jin official who met Chen Xing's shifu many years ago and considers Chen Xing his fellow disciple.

SIMA YAO 司馬曜: The Emperor of Jin.

GU QING 顾青: Feng Qianjun's fiancée. Bears a striking resemblance to Princess Qinghe.

XIE DAOYUN 谢道韫: Xie An's niece, a doctor.

WEN ZHE 温哲: Head of Dongzhe Bank—actually both a man in disguise and an undead exorcist.

Great Qin

FU JIAN 苻坚: The Emperor of Qin and the leader of the Five Hu.

WANG ZIYE 王子夜: Shi Hai's false identity at the Qin court, which he uses to manipulate Fu Jian.

TUOBA YAN 拓跋焱: The young commander of the imperial guards. Very fond of Chen Xing.

MURONG CHONG 慕容冲: Head of the Murong clan. Fu Jian favors him for his beauty.

PRINCESS QINGHE 清河公主: Murong Chong's sister and Fu Jian's concubine. Deceased thanks to Chiyou's machinations.

Chiyou's Forces

CHIYOU 蚩尤: The Demon God and God of War. His blood is what causes mortals to transform into the living dead.

SHI HAI 尸亥: A powerful undead entity who acts as Chiyou's underling and carries out his will in the mortal world.

SIMA YUE 司馬越: One of the eight princes who died during the War of the Eight Princes, now resurrected as a drought fiend along with his brothers, including Sima Liang, Sima Yi and Sima Ying.

SIMA WEI 司马玮: Another prince resurrected as a drought fiend; Sima Wei seems to have a will of his own, unlike the other undead generals.

Other

XIAO SHAN 肖山: A young boy raised by wolves who was entrusted to Chen Xing's care.

XIANG YUYAN 项语嫣: Xiang Shu's deceased mother, a Han woman who came to live at Chi Le Chuan twenty-two years ago—via time travel.

ZHANG LIU 张留: An exorcist from three hundred years prior to the events of the story. Along with Xiang Yuyan, he brought about the Silence of All Magic by sealing the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth in the Dinghai Pearl.

BAILI LUN 百里伦: Chen Xing's shifu.

Name Guide

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags:

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

DOUBLING: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, e.g., "Mangmang"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

DA-: A prefix meaning big/older.

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

-ER: An affectionate diminutive added to names, literally "son" or "child." Always a suffix. Can sometimes be a fixed part of a person's name, rather than just an affectionate suffix.

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE/DAGE: Older brother or an older male friend.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

SHIFU: Master; teacher.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. Usually implies that they studied under the same shifu.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. Usually implies that they studied under the same shifu.

DAREN: Similar to "milord," a way of respectfully addressing someone who is either an aristocrat or a government official of medium or higher rank.

XIANDI: A respectful term of address for a younger man the speaker isn't particularly close to. It is archaic in modern Chinese.

LAOYE: Literally "grandfather," used as a term of address for the master of a household.

SHAOYE: Young master.

SHAOZHU: Young master; specifically the direct heir of a household.

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

Note on Spelling

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

General Consonants

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

General Vowels

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

Glossary

SUI XING: An archaic name for the planet Jupiter.

YAO: Supernatural beings, ghosts, and spirits—similar to the term "yokai" in Japanese.

HU PEOPLE: Hu is a historical term for non-Han people, sometimes translated as "barbarians." It is often associated specifically with horseback riders from the steppes to the north and west of the Central Plains.

MARTIAL ARTS: In wuxia fiction and other fantasy that borrows from it, it is common for martial arts practitioners to possess heightened senses as a result of honing their physical abilities. A skilled martial artist may be able to hear or see things other people can't.

MARA: A demon from Buddhist mythology associated with darkness and death. In addition to death and destruction, Mara traditionally represents obstruction to enlightenment.

THREE IMMORTAL SOULS AND SEVEN MORTAL FORMS: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls that represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal souls or mortal forms that remain with the body of the deceased. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but Daoism commonly features three hun and seven po.

TIMEKEEPING: For much of Chinese history, time was measured in two-hour increments, starting at 11:00 p.m. The hours in this system are zi, chou, yin, mao, chen, si, wu, wei, shen, you, xu, and hai.

Timeline of Historical Events

QIN DYNASTY (221–206 BCE): The first official dynasty of China that scholars can agree upon. Everything before this (the Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns, the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties) is considered mytho-historical. Qin Shihuang was the first emperor, and the dynasty only lasted through his son before it fell.

CHU-HAN CONTENTION (206–202 BCE): Technically composed of two parts—the Eighteen Kingdoms, during which warlords fought for the right to rule, and the Chu-Han period, during which the Chu and Han kingdoms, led by Xiang Yu and Liu Bang respectively, fought. Liu Bang won the decisive Battle of Gaixia in 202 BCE, thus ending the conflict.

HAN DYNASTY (202 BCE–220 CE): Established by Liu Bang. It was considered a golden age, and the "Han" name was passed down to the people, the language, and the culture that stemmed from it.

THREE KINGDOMS (220–280 CE): A period of conflict where three main kingdoms—Wei (ruled by the Cao family), Wu (ruled by the Sun family), and Shu (ruled by the Liu family)—fought for the right to rule. The conflict technically began with the end of the Han dynasty, with many warlords fighting for the upper hand, but eventually settled into these three factions.

WESTERN JIN DYNASTY (266–316 CE): Ruled by the Sima dynasty, who ended the Three Kingdoms era in 280 CE after officially conquering Eastern Wu.

WAR OF THE EIGHT PRINCES (291–306 CE): A war fought between eight princes of the Western Jin dynasty, all with the family name Sima, over who would be the regent during the reign of Emperor Hui. The aftermath led to

the era of the Sixteen Kingdoms in the north and the reign of the Eastern Jin dynasty in the south.

UPRISING OF THE FIVE HU (304–316 CE): This took place in conjunction with the War of the Eight Princes. The combination of all this fighting eventually led to the downfall of the Western Jin dynasty.

SIXTEEN KINGDOMS/STATES (304–439 CE): An era in the north where sixteen kingdoms, ruled by a quick succession of Hu and Han both, came and went. The term "Sixteen Kingdoms" is often used in conjunction with the Five Hu, due to the significant role that the Hu played during this time. The dominant kingdom during the time period of *Dinghai Fusheng Records* is the Qin state, led by Fu Jian. (Fu Jian's dynasty is known as the Former Qin in historiographical settings to distinguish it from other, later dynasties also named Qin, but at the time it would have simply been referred to as Qin.)

EASTERN JIN DYNASTY (317–420 CE): The period *Dinghai Fusheng Records* is set in. During this period, the two main forces were the Eastern Jin Dynasty in the south and the Qin Dynasty in the north.

Footnotes

Chapter 77

[1] The Xia dynasty spanned from 2070–1600 BCE, and was followed by the Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties. The Jin dynasty (266–420 CE) is the period in which this story takes place.

[2] Mount Buzhou (不周山) is a mythological sacred mountain in the Kunlun range, said to hold up the heavens.

[3] Pan An was a poet who lived from about 250 to 300 CE. He was so attractive that his name has since become a synonym for handsome men. Wei Jie, also of the Jin dynasty, was also famous for his looks from a young age. They are considered two of the four most handsome men in Chinese history.

Chapter 79

[4] Shangsi Jie, an ancient Chinese festival held on the third day of the third lunar month. Festivalgoers traditionally cleansed themselves in rivers to ward off misfortune, enjoyed spring outings, and composed poetry.

[5] The Dragon Boat Festival occurs on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

Chapter 81

[6] A region between the ancient regions of Bashu and Qinlong, where the Di people lived.

Chapter 82

[7] Ying Zheng (259–210 BC) was the founder of the Qin dynasty. Under his leadership, the Qin defeated the other six of the Seven Warring States (Han, Zhao, Wei, Chu, Yan, Qi) to form Chinese history's first unitary state.

Chapter 85

[8] The Lantingji Xu, "Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion," was written by Wang Xizhi in 353. A reflection on the transient nature of life and a celebration of the present moment amid the passage of time, it is noted for the quality of both its calligraphy and its prose.

Chapter 86

[9] Present-day Nanjing.

[10] Refers to a capping ceremony (加冠), an ancient coming-of-age ceremony that marked passage into adulthood. It was usually done when a man turned twenty. During the ceremony, the father or an older brother was usually the one "capping" the young man by bestowing him with adult headwear.

[11] Kong Qiu was Confucius's birth name. Chen Xing is quoting the Analects, Book II, Chapter 4: "At fifteen, I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ears. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right."

[12] The first emperors of China, once worshipped as divine ancestral spirits: Fuxi, Shennong, the Yellow Emperor, Shaohao, Zhuanxu, Ku, Yao, and Shun.

[13] A famous battle that marked the end of the Shang dynasty.

[14] Fu Rong was the real historical Fu Jian’s younger brother.

Chapter 88

[15] Yaoguang: One of the seven main stars of the Northern Dipper. It is often granted legendary and mystical significance in Chinese culture.

[16] Kaiyang: One of the seven main stars of the Northern Dipper. It is traditionally associated with the East and symbolizes the rising sun, brightness, and new beginnings.

[17] Yuheng: One of the seven main stars of the Northern Dipper. It is also associated with the Azure Dragon of the East in the Chinese zodiac.

[18] Tianquan: One of the seven main stars of the Northern Dipper. It is one of the “Five Emperors”; major stars in the Chinese celestial system. It is usually considered part of the Heavenly Market cluster.

[19] Tianji: One of the seven main stars of the Northern Dipper. It is considered part of the Heavenly Market and associated with the imperial domain.

[20] Tianxuan: One of the seven main stars of the Northern Dipper. It is part of the Heavenly Net grouping, connected to matters of governance and divine mandate in traditional Chinese thought.

[21] Bo, Zhong, Shu, Ji is a traditional Chinese naming order for siblings; Bo is used for the oldest and Ji for the youngest. In this context, it

metaphorically refers to Xiao-Ji being the fourth star.

Chapter 91

[22] Tian Liang (天亮) means “dawn.” Liang (亮) on its own can mean “bright” or “loud.”

[23] Chong Ming (重明) can be read as “bright once more.”

[24] The Mandarin for “oak tree” is pronounced identically to Xiang Shu’s name, although it’s written with different characters (橡树).

Chapter 92

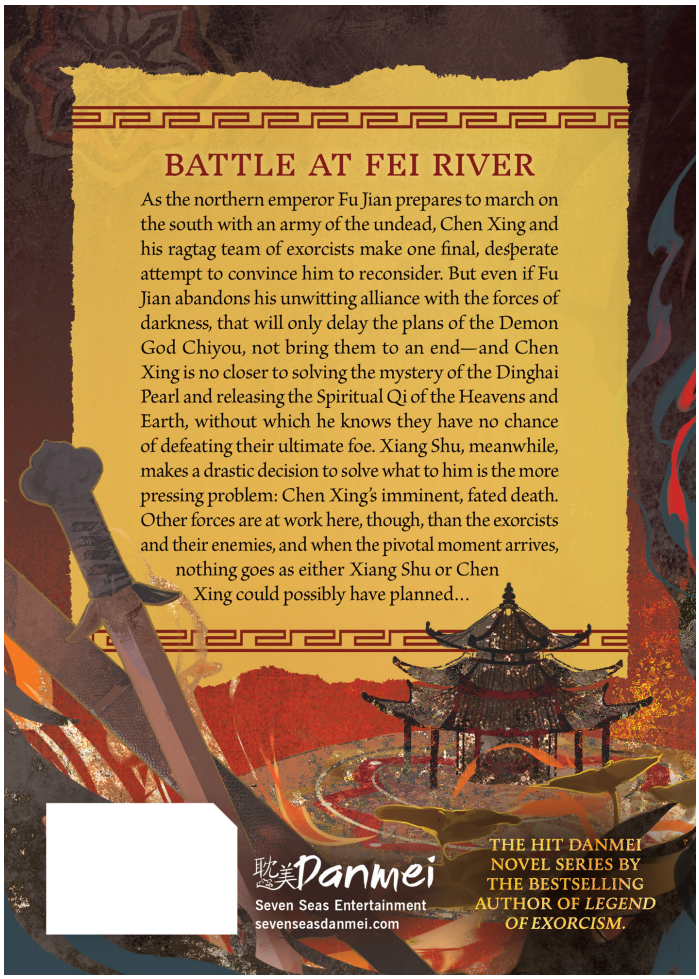
[25] Hehuan powder is a traditional remedy derived from the flowers and bark of the mimosa tree. It is used to treat anxiety, stress, and depression, and its fertility-suppressing effects made it a historical method of birth control.

Chapter 93

[26] Jia Nanfeng was the empress at the time the War of the Eight Princes broke out. She had Sima Wei executed in 291 CE after he forged an imperial edict that granted him control over the military and attempted to seize the capital.

Chapter 97

[27] Literally “mysterious door escaping Armageddon,” Qi Men Dun Jia is a traditional Chinese metaphysical science commonly associated with feng shui, divination, and military strategy.


BATTLE AT FEI RIVER
As the northern emperor Fu Jian prepares to march on the south with an army of the undead, Chen Xing and his ragtag team of exorcists make one final, desperate attempt to convince him to reconsider. But even if Fu Jian abandons his unwitting alliance with the forces of darkness, that will only delay the plans of the Demon God Chiyou, not bring them to an end—and Chen Xing is no closer to solving the mystery of the Dinghai Pearl and releasing the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth, without which he knows they have no chance of defeating their ultimate foe. Xiang Shu, meanwhile, makes a drastic decision to solve what to him is the more pressing problem: Chen Xing's imminent, fated death. Other forces are at work here, though, than the exorcists and their enemies, and when the pivotal moment arrives, nothing goes as either Xiang Shu or Chen Xing could possibly have planned...
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